

BLACK THUNDER

B · M · BOWER



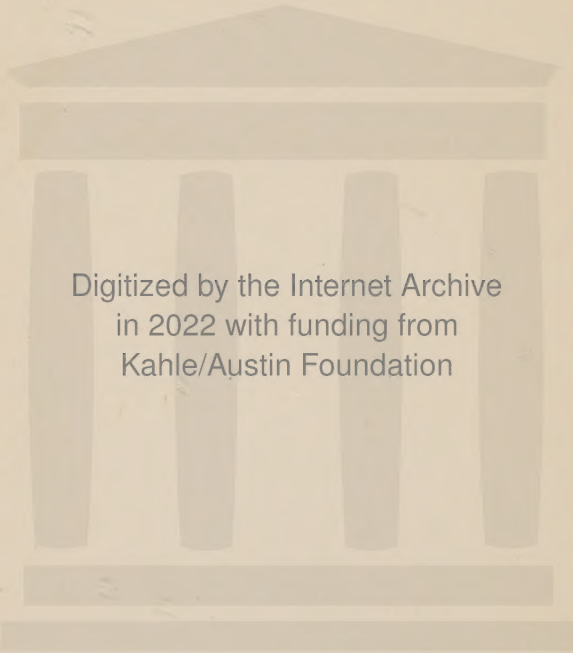
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BLACK THUNDER

By B. M. Bower

GOOD INDIAN

LONESOME LAND

THE RANCH AT THE WOLVERINE

THE FLYING U'S LAST STAND

THE HERITAGE OF THE SIOUX

STARR, OF THE DESERT

CABIN FEVER

SKYRIDER

RIM O' THE WORLD

THE QUIRT

COW-COUNTRY

CASEY RYAN

THE TRAIL OF THE WHITE MULE

THE VOICE AT JOHNNYWATER

THE PAROWAN BONANZA

THE EAGLE'S WING

THE BELLEHELEN MINE

DESERT BREW

MEADOWLARK BASIN

BLACK THUNDER

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By
B. M. BOWER



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BLACK THUNDER

CHAPTER ONE

SUTTEE

ON a flat-topped rock above the Indian village a lean young medicine man stood sharply revealed against the sunset. Head thrown back, arms raised and palms turned outward, he invoked the spirits that dwelt in the caves of the north wind. Pivoting slowly, he faced the home of the rising sun, and the sing-song chanting of his prayer hushed the high-pitched ululations of the squaws wailing in the camp below. Those spirits who dwelt in the land of the south wind he called. Turning toward the west, the molten glow of one last sunbeam struck his face like a spotlight and lifted the cruel lines into startling prominence as his voice rolled up to the still heights of the mountains with a weird note that startled a gaunt wolf into howling. The sun stared for a moment and slid down behind Diamond Mountains. All the vivid ochre and rose and ultramarine in the sky dulled and merged and became pale violet that deepened slowly to purple; and still the sonorous invocation boomed on into the twilight.

In the great painted tepee set at the head of the circle of lodges Chief Sho-kup lay dead, with a sardonic grin twisting his bitter old lips into a savage

Black Thunder

travesty of humor, and all the tribe mourned his passing.

Annie Green-Leaves-in-the-Spring, eldest sister of Waunona Sho-kup the widow, squatted in the shadow of the dead chief's tepee and wailed with the rest of the squaws, her huge old body rocking backward and forward as she keened the dead. Her shrill lamentations quavered down the scale of sorrow to a minor note held suspended while she listened, pushing her unkempt hair from over the ear turned toward the medicine man, Wa-hi (the Fox). She swayed her fat body toward the widow, gave a long-drawn howl and hissed a warning rapidly in Shoshone.

"Listen, Waunona. Wa-hi has spoken your name. He is saying to the spirits that you called the bad ones to sit beside Sho-kup."

"Before the Great Spirit called him away, Sho-kup spoke to Wa-hi," Waunona answered disjointedly in the brief intervals of her wailing. "Wa-hi will be the chief, and I go to be his squaw. Sho-kup gave me to Wa-hi. He gave his horses, his lodge, his gun that shoots many times, his robes and all that he had. Wa-hi tells the Great Spirit that Waunona is his squaw."

"Wa-hi tells the spirits that Waunona is an enemy," Annie Green-Leaves murmured insistently, her voice rising and falling in the chanted Song for

Suttee

the Dead. "Wa-hi is of the foxes. Listen! He is telling the spirits that Sho-kup goes on the long journey and takes with him his horses, his weapons of war, his robes and his squaw. He tells the spirits to watch Waunona for she has an evil heart. Are your ears asleep, Waunona? He will send you after Sho-kup."

On the flat-topped rock the figure of Wa-hi stood, a black statue from which rolled endlessly the Call to the Spirits. Waunona's head turned cautiously that way and her shoulders sagged as she listened. It was true — other squaws in the mourning circle were listening surreptitiously. Wa-hi was adroitly weaving denunciations of Waunona into his prayer. He was beseeching the spirits that would guide Sho-kup to the Happy Hunting Ground; imploring them to guard well the spirit of Waunona who would follow; to guard her well and prevent her from communicating with the bad spirits she had called to the lodge of Sho-kup when he lay sick. Wa-hi was saying that it had been told to him by his medicine that Waunona had worked a spell on Sho-kup. A bad spirit had come at her behest and entered into Sho-kup, and had drunk the strength of Sho-kup so that he could no longer cling to his body but had been pushed out into the spirit trail. Waunona must be guarded well upon the journey she would take.

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"Three times Wa-hi has failed," murmured Annie Green-Leaves. "Wa-hi fears the punishment. He is the fox! Now he speaks to the spirits — and knows that the ears of his people are drinking his words. Go to the white men, Waunona. Tell them this thing must not be. Chief Carver is absent from the village — he digs in the mountain for gold. Go to Chief Gaylord. He is a just man and he will listen."

How it was done no squaw in the circle could tell save Annie Green-Leaves. Perhaps Waunona drooped forward until she lay flat in the black shadows of the lodge. Perhaps she crept inside — though the spirits were there talking to the spirit of Sho-kup who was departing on his long journey — and perhaps she crept out under the painted hide-wall of the farthest side, next the creek.

Annie Green-Leaves hitched cautiously nearer to the lodge so that no vacant place would be apparent. Louder she lamented, her ears strained to catch any sound of loosened rock on the steep slope to the river running sluggishly between gravel bars. But Waunona, her sister, made no more sound than a ghost flitting away down the wooded slope.

In the post-office corner of the store at Whisky Flat, Burt Gaylord was making up the mail for Pioche after hours, for it was pay day at the Lucky

Suttee

Chance mine and he had been kept busy all the evening. Making up the mail was not an arduous task at any time, and on this night there were just six letters to be wrapped and tied. It was while he was reaching up to the shelf above the window for the ball of twine that he found himself staring straight into the terrified eyes of Waunona Sho-kup. Her blanket-framed face was impassive, but her lips moved stiffly, framing words whose meaning he did not understand; but terror knows no limitation of language and her eyes told him what her mask-like features could not reveal. When he hurried to the door and unlocked it the squaw darted in, ran to the nearest counter and crouched behind it on the floor. There was no mistaking that action. Gaylord stared after her as he relocked the door, pushing a heavy extra bolt across before he leaned over the counter and tried to coax her into speaking English. But Waunona could not even express her fear in Shoshone, much less the white man's strange jargon, so presently Gaylord gave it up, finished wrapping the six letters and tied them securely before he went off to find Milt Frisbee.

"There's been some powwow down at the Injun camp," Milt told him. "The wind's in the wrong direction or you could hear the hubbub up here easy enough. They was bangin' tin cans and squallin' like cats shut in a cellar when I rode up from the

Black Thunder

Lucky Chance. There ain't been an Injun loose anywhere in our end of the valley all day, except the squaw you took in. If you like, I'll go see what she's got to say, Burt."

At first Waunona had nothing whatever to say. She was sitting where Gaylord had left her, on the floor behind the rough counter with a stack of gold-pans crowding her right elbow and a box overflowing with boots at her left. Her blanket was drawn over her head and she was rocking back and forth and crooning the weird chant the other squaws were wailing outside the lodge of their dead chief.

"Somebody's dead over in camp," Milt Frisbee declared when he caught the significance of her performance. "That's Sho-kup's squaw, Waunona. Funny she wouldn't stay and do her howlin' with the rest of 'em, if it's old Sho-kup himself that died."

"She was scared half to death when she came bolting in here," Gaylord told him. "I know Indians pretty well, myself, but I don't speak their language much. Try and find out what's the matter, can't you?"

Milt leaned over the counter again, repeated a question or two several times and finally got an answer. Once started, the squaw talked rapidly, her voice rising now and then to an excited whining.

"Bad medicine," Milt said gravely, straightening up so that he could look Gaylord in the eye.

Suttee

“We’re liable to have the whole bunch on our backs before the night’s over, and if they come there’ll be hell a-poppin’. Old Sho-kup has cashed in, and that skunk Wa-hi is next in line for chief. Wau-nona says that Wa-hi wants to add her to the burning. You know, Burt — they’ll gather up everything old Sho-kup owns, bring their own donations and have a big funeral fire ’long about daylight, probably.”

“Sounds fishy that they’d want to burn the widow,” Gaylord said thoughtfully. “But the squaw was scared, no mistake about that, and from the little I’ve seen of her it would take a good deal to stampede Waunona. The Indians all know they must never under any circumstances go behind the counter. Jim Carver played some kind of a trick to make them superstitious about it. Good idea, too — it saves a lot of trouble. The very fact that she went behind the counter to hide convinces me that it’s a pretty serious matter. But as to burning her with old Sho-kup” — Gaylord spread his hands in disbelief — “that hardly seems possible. Still, Indians do some pretty horrible things, sometimes.”

“It’s some deviltry of Wa-hi’s,” Milt Frisbee guessed shrewdly. “It ain’t the custom, as far as I ever heard. They’ll burn just about everything else for a chief, but I never heard of their burning his squaw.”

Black Thunder

Milt turned, sprawled over the counter again and spoke several sentences in the Shoshone tongue. Waunona looked up at him, stared for a space and shook her head; mumbled a few words and went back to her keening.

"Old Annie Green-Leaves sent her here," Milt reported. "She doesn't think any one else knows where she went, but if they want her they'll sure track her. The squaws were holding their powwow while Wa-hi was calling the spirits together for the big hullabaloo to-night. She says it ain't customary to send the squaws along on the spirit trail, but Wa-hi claims she witched Sho-kup or something like that. What're you goin' to do, Burt? If they come after her, we've got to give up the squaw, or fight."

"Better pass the word around, hadn't you, Milt?" Gaylord retorted meaningly. "I suppose we can hold out here in the store longer than anywhere else, and we'll have water and supplies right here."

Whisky Flat was as mild a little mining town as any camp in Nevada could be in the middle seventies. Half a dozen men might be called permanent residents of the place, with transients coming and going as the tide of gold-seeking ebbed and flowed through the mountain passes. Back in the hills a couple of mines worked with small crews, and prospectors pecked at small mineral veins during the

Suttee

summer. Since the secluded mountain valley held no other camp save the Indian village of Shoshones half a mile away, the population of Whisky Flat always doubled on pay day at the Lucky Chance. The one saloon, owned by an asthmatic old miner called Kentucky Joe, might almost be called a scene of gay revelry on this night. That is, a poker game was running and Kentucky Joe wore a white apron to celebrate the influx of seven customers. Ten men were present, enjoying themselves to the fullest extent of their vices as well as their pockets, when Milt Frisbee and the temporary postmaster entered the saloon and elbowed their way up to the bar.

Kentucky Joe, wheezing like a leaky pump from his exertions, swiped his hand hastily across his perspiring forehead and reached hospitably for a bottle when he saw them, but Milt shook his head and jumped upon the bar where he could look down upon the farthest poker table and claim the instant attention of every man there. Milt was perhaps the most popular man in Whisky Flat, but he had not won the esteem of his fellows by making flowery speeches. He went straight to the point.

“Boys, there’s a big powwow over in the Injun camp. Old Chief Sho-kup died to-day, and that dirty rat Wa-hi is making medicine to beat four of a kind. Sho-kup’s squaw has run over here and hid in the store. She says Wa-hi aims to send her along

Black Thunder

with Sho-kup's horses to the Happy Hunting Ground; in other words, burn her with old Sho-kup. Now I'm puttin' it up to you boys. What shall we do about it? Send her back to camp, or shall we stand 'em off if they come after her? There's over a hundred of them bucks, and judgin' from the noise they've been makin', they'll be worked up to fightin' pitch if they do come. If we stand 'em off, I guess it better be at the store."

Kentucky Joe exhaled a long breath with a whistling sound, tore off his white apron, reached under the bar for his six-shooter and buckled the cartridge belt around his big middle on his way to the door. There he pushed and struggled ineffectively for two minutes while men crowded past him on their way out, tightening gun belts as they went. Burt Gaylord's mouth twisted into a grin of complete understanding as he joined the stampede. Milt Frisbee, jumping off the bar when he saw his audience go crashing through the doorway, was the last man outside.

CHAPTER TWO

WAYFARERS

COMING up the trail that, miles back, turned off the main stage road from Pioche to Palisade, a wagon covered with weather-stained canvas and drawn by two tired mules reached the first little green spot within Antelope Valley. Behind the travelers the rocky pass narrowed between steep, bare mountainsides until it was just wide enough to hold both the river and the road. Before them the valley stretched away refreshingly green, walled in by mountains on either side. A horseman who had been following the wagon with a rifle balanced across the saddle in front of him — looking for game, he said — touched with his heels the sweaty flanks of his sedate bay horse and trotted up alongside the spring-seat where two women sat quiet with the setting sun shining straight into their tired eyes.

“I think we had better camp here and let the poor animals have a few mouthfuls of this splendid grass before we go on,” the man said briskly to the girl nearest him. A preacher he was — the full, rich tone that carried the love of all mankind in each vibrant inflection betrayed his calling, without help of the clerical black frock coat. “I know you must

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be tired, Miss Owen, and a half hour of rest will do us all a world of good. Lubelle can start a fire while I see what bounty the Lord will bestow upon me down there at the creek. I have had some wonderful harvests since I became a fisher of men — but you just ought to see what happens when I whip one of these mountain streams for trout! God willing, I shall have a round half dozen fish ready for the coals in almost as many minutes. Lubelle, over there under that wonderful white pine will be an ideal picnic ground. I'll race you to the supper, a hymn book against a pair of beaded gloves that the fish will be waiting before the coals are ready! ”

“To-morrow I sing hymns from a book,” retorted the squaw who drove, and pulled the mules out of the trail and toward the droopy-branched white pine that had ventured farther into the valley than her sister pines close-grouped on the steep slope above them.

“Oh, wait a minute, Lubelle! I want to go down to the creek and look for gold nuggets,” the white girl cried impulsively.

The squaw leaned toward her mistress and whispered while she slowed the mules to a willing stop.

“Look for the gold with much splash. Then I have the hymn book from Brother Van! ”

“Well — but that would be cheating, and besides, I'm terribly hungry, Lubelle! ”

Wayfarers

“No fair, plotting against the whites!” Brother Van called suspiciously. “Miss Owen, I think you had better gather pine nuts while I fish. Those cones should be full if the squirrels have not been too industrious in making ready for winter. I do not know this stream nor the trout within it, but since there is a camp in the valley the fish are likely to be rather shy—and I do really need those gloves!”

Lubelle tittered behind her hand, after the manner of squaws the West over, and began to unpack a meager cooking outfit. Brother Van pulled hook and line from a saddle pocket, tied his horse to a young quaking aspen that had shed nearly all of its leaves and went trotting toward the creek with his hat in his hand and his bald pate shining in the last level rays of the sun. A grasshopper clicked away and dropped to the sand. Brother Van pounced, sweeping his broad-brimmed hat downward. The girl watched him go plunk on his knees, catch the grasshopper expertly as he lifted his hat, rise and walk on triumphantly to the stream baiting his hook as he went.

“Race starts from here,” he hallooed between cupped palms to the squaw before he drew his hunting knife and knelt to cut a slim willow for a rod.

By the great white pine, Lubelle stopped and stood motionless, her face turned toward the wooded

Black Thunder

foothills farther up the valley. Arlea Owen, walking toward her, halted abruptly and stole back to the wagon; stepped up on the hub of a front wheel and felt under the seat cushion for the tablet of cheap paper she had hidden there. The Indian woman's pose was perfect. The girl moved softly to one side, sat down on a rock and began to sketch rapidly the background of rugged, forest-clothed peaks with the magnificent white-pine tree standing alone in the foreground and just beneath the outer branches the squaw with her head lifted, listening so intently that she seemed utterly oblivious to all around her. The sketch was nearly finished before the Indian moved. Arlea hid the tablet again under the seat cushion and went over to the tree.

"What is it, Lubelle? A bear?"

The squaw turned slowly as if she were pulling herself reluctantly out of a dream. The age-old antagonism of race showed for just an instant in her eyes before a smile of affection curved her lips, as she looked at the girl.

"Do you not hear?" she asked, in the precise speech of one who has been carefully taught to speak a foreign tongue. "It is the wailing of my people for one who has died. I think it is the Kada-toi-ab-ie tribe. They live not far away. Some Indian has gone on the long journey."

"You mean you hear them mourning?"

Wayfarers

"I hear them call to the spirits," said Lubelle and withdrew into the aloofness that frequently puzzled and chilled the white girl who knew little of Indians and their ways save what she had learned from this splendid woman who had chosen to serve her.

Lubelle gathered dry wood for the fire, stopping often to listen with her face turned to the sunset. A chill wind crept down from the mountains as dusk flowed softly into the valley. The crackling of the first small flames brought a pleasant sense of comfort to the white girl, who moved languidly about, gathering pine cones heavy with ripe nuts.

"Bring the cones to the fire, Arlea," Lubelle called once when she saw the girl trying to extract a tightly embedded pine nut from its little fibrous sheath. "The heat will open the cones." But her voice was dull, as if her thoughts were journeying far afield.

Arlea brought half a dozen cones and laid them close to the blaze, with something of the squaw's manner infecting her own mood. Her black dress told mutely that she too was mourning for the dead, though the time of wailing had passed and melancholy dulled her eyes and slowed her steps.

As the night wind rose and came sweeping slowly down the creek bottom, she too heard the far-off chanting voice of the medicine man, and though she did not understand what the invocation por-

Black Thunder

tended, a lump rose in her throat. Too keenly the weird cadence of the voice recalled her own late bereavement that had left her an orphan in this wild land. She looked a wistful question at the squaw and received an inscrutable glance.

“Do not be afraid,” Lubelle said quietly. “They sorrow for the dead — that is all.” She turned back to her simple preparations for supper, and said no more.

Arlea sat down with her back against the pine tree and stared with sombre detachment into the flames. Try as she would to adapt herself to these savage conditions and to the wilderness that spread mile upon mile in all directions, there were times when the desolation that had come into her life pressed like a dead weight upon her soul.

They had been more than kind to her in Palisade when tragedy had taken hold of her life almost without warning and had shaken out of it the hopes and plans that had seemed so vital. When her mother had fallen desperately ill in the rough little mining town, Brother Van had found Lubelle and brought her to share the nursing with Arlea. After the funeral Lubelle of her own accord had returned to the cabin and stayed, watching over Arlea even more jealously than the dead mother had done. Brother Van had been a host in himself, especially when her father had soon after been shot down in

Wayfarers

a street brawl — one of those innocent bystanders who usually suffer most when bullets fly in the streets.

Every one had been kind, yes. But the population of a mining camp in boom times shifts and changes overnight. The kind ones had gone on to other camps — all save Brother Van and Lubelle Wan-washe. They had taken her in charge as a matter of course. While she was grateful, and returned their loyalty and affection in good measure, there were times when the tearing asunder of every home tie grew maddening; times when she felt absolutely, terrifyingly alone in the world. That mood settled upon her now while she sat and listened to the unearthly, chanting voice in the distance.

Brother Van returned with nine fat trout and a clamorous appetite. Lubelle had gone to unhitch the mules and tie them where they could crop the sweet, ripened grass next the creek, where Brother Van's horse was already feeding — he having been first served by the squaw after the fire was going. Brother Van looked at the fire and smiled.

“Lubelle will get her hymn book, I see — but I must have those beaded buckskin gloves,” he chuckled. “The fish were biting well. I gauged your appetite by mine, Miss Owen, and didn't stop with six.” He bustled about the final preparations for their supper as was his habit; preacher though

Black Thunder

he was, no one on the trails could cook trout so deliciously as Brother Van.

"We can't be far from an Indian village," he observed in the pause when the glowing coals must do their final savory work on the fish. "I suppose there's a village somewhere in the valley — a beautiful spot like this would never lack Indian dwellers. Some sort of powwow going on, I should judge from the sounds."

Arlea did not answer, and the fat little preacher proceeded with his work. Lubelle came walking toward them through the twilight; a handsome squaw, perhaps thirty years old, with a tinge of red on her high cheek bones and the regal air of some Roman queen of ancient days. The tablet of rough paper hidden beneath the cushion in the wagon seat was half-filled with clever sketches, mostly of Lubelle Wan-washe in various moods and poses.

"You must try and have your uncle keep Lubelle in your service, Miss Owen," the little preacher observed as the Indian woman approached. "She is one of the finest specimens of aboriginal womanhood I have ever met. Your uncle will never find a better servant for you."

"And I almost hope we may never find my uncle!" Arlea flashed back, speaking according to her present mood. "And if we do find him and he isn't worse than a stranger, I'm going to make him

Wayfarers

take me out of this horrible place. Oh, I know," she added contritely when she saw the look in Brother Van's face, "I'm talking wild, you think. My uncle will be another father to me, and it's a beautiful country and I can understand why most of you love it. But you must admit, Brother Van, that it has not treated me very kindly. If we do succeed in finding my uncle, he will be the only relative I have in the world, so far as I know. And what if he's a criminal? What if something happened to him? Something may. Something will, if we stay here. I firmly believe that the Indian gods or some other gods have put a curse on me. Now call me a heathen, Brother Van, and do please fill up my plate! You're wonderful, you know — but you are the only bit of evidence God has got to prove His loving kindness toward me."

Brother Van was too wise to argue. He gave her a smile — and a tin plate filled with broiled trout and warmed-over biscuits, both of which did their share to pull her out of the bitter mood and brighten the next half hour. Lubelle came and found them eating their broiled fish as if their hunger was the only thing that mattered, and without a word she pulled a tin plate from the box and joined them in the simple meal.

"What do you suppose the powwow is about, Lubelle?" Brother Van asked her, looking up from

Black Thunder

pulling the backbone unbroken from the fish he held in his fingers. "It is past the season for the harvest dances."

"To-morrow I sing hymns from a book," Lubelle told him calmly, and let the question go unanswered.

Brother Van gave her an odd look, glanced involuntarily at Arlea and wiped his fingers on a surprisingly white handkerchief. He knew Indians well enough to refrain from pressing the question.

"Lubelle says that the Indians are mourning because some one has died in the village," Arlea told him between bites.

"You do not go to the village for preaching at this time," Lubelle said, more hurriedly than is the habit of Indians. "My people do not like white men in their village when they mourn. You stay close for Arlea may want."

Brother Van leaned forward and studied her face across the dying fire. There were times when he found Lubelle Wan-washe just a bit trying to his patience; times when her veiled hints almost irritated him. He did not relish her sphinx-like moods, and now he was tempted to ask her bluntly what she meant by warning him away from the Indian village. She ought to know that he would not leave Arlea until he had placed her safely in the care of her uncle, whom rumor had located in Whisky Flat.

Wayfarers

“ ‘One thing at a time and that done well!’ ” he retorted in his briskest tone. “My present mission is to take Miss Owen to find her uncle. Now, Lubelle, when you have finished eating, I think we had better start. I am told that it is nearly ten miles from the Lower Pass to the town of Whisky Flat, which is not much of a town, I fear, since there has been no boom of any consequence in this valley. Few people come this way and it will be a lonely road from now on. We have a late moon, you know, so the sooner we reach our destination the better for all of us, I think.”

“Oh, yes!” Arlea set down her plate. “I’m sick and tired of camping out just wherever it comes handy to stop. Do let’s get where we can sleep in a real bed once more, and sit down on a real chair! I’m afraid I never was meant for a pioneer, Brother Van. The savage life doesn’t appeal to me very much. There go those horrible wolves, howling again!”

“Soon we will be in a house,” Lubelle said calmly. “I do not like houses, you do not like living under the sky. Our ways are not the same.” Her face fell into the expressionless stolidity that is so baffling to the white race, but Arlea would not be repelled by it.

“No, our ways are not the same — but we can love across the difference,” she said lightly, and

Black Thunder

jumped up to help with the repacking. "Come on, Lubelle, let's hurry. I've lived under your open sky for four days. Now it's your turn to live under a roof."

"After this rest, the mules should travel better," Brother Van said wistfully. It is likely that he was quite as tired as the girl, but no one seemed to think of that. Brother Van was short and fat and bald, and the hair curling down from temples to ears and flowing backward in a wavy fringe to his shoulders was gray. How many years he had spent wandering up and down the trails, ministering to the sick and the discouraged, preaching the word of God to good and bad alike, no one seemed to know. Brother Van never took the trouble to worry about himself, but, tired or no, he had his horse saddled and was ready to help the squaw finish hitching the mules to the wagon by the time Arlea had packed the few supper dishes into the box.

Refreshed, once more yielding to pleasurable anticipations, they started away up the rough trail along the river. As they plodded nearer and nearer to Whisky Flat, the measured thud-thud-thud of the Indian drums came throbbing down through the velvety starlight, mingled with the weird lamentations of the squaws and the medicine man's chanted Call to the Spirits.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SONG OF WAR

ON a steep, rocky hill no more than a mile from Whisky Flat where the road left the creek bottom and curved away toward the hills to avoid a high, narrow ridge, the mule team balked. Only Brother Van's presence of mind in jumping off his horse and rolling a rock behind the rear wheel nearest him prevented a possible disaster; for Arlea was curled down among the blankets behind the wagon seat and would have gone over the bluff with the wagon had it backed down hill.

"Don't whip the poor mules, Lubelle," Brother Van mildly reproved the squaw. "This is a hard pull, a very hard pull, and the poor animals are tired. What ropes have you in the wagon, Lubelle? I think I can help with Abinadab, if I can find a rope strong enough. We will attach it to the wagon tongue and to the saddle, and I will lead Abinadab and you may lead the mules. I think perhaps by that means we can win through to the top of the hill. Miss Owen is asleep? Then by all means let her rest as long as possible. Perhaps we may even get the wagon up the hill without awakening her."

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“My people do not sing the song of mourning. It is not good,” said Lubelle, significantly, speaking in an undertone lest the girl in the wagon should hear.

Beside the sweaty mules, the two stood dimly outlined in the starlight, the fat, bald little preacher and the Junoesque figure of the squaw. Brother Van’s face was very grave. He knew that any untimely interruption to Indian ceremonies boded ill for some one — the white men, usually; but when he spoke his voice was of the same resonant timbre, flowing smoothly from sentence to sentence; an oratorical voice that would have seemed an affectation had it not been so steeped in kindness and the unconscious charm of a child.

“The God that led the children of Israel watches over us now,” he intoned softly. “If He is for us, who shall stand against us? I do not know this particular tribe, but your people are my people, Lubelle. God watches over all. Get the rope and we will pull up the hill if we can, and hurry on to our destination. Whisky Flat cannot be far away. We should be nearly there if my information was correct.”

Lubelle lifted the lid of the jockey box — carefully, without the slightest sound that would disturb her mistress — and withdrew a neat coil of stout rope. Brother Van took it from her brown hand,

The Song of War

uncoiled it and tied one end to the lead ring of the wagon tongue. Abinadab, a stocky young bay with crinkly black mane and tail, seemed to know exactly what was required, and stopped of his own accord just an easy distance ahead of the mules when Brother Van led him past. Head turned back alongside his shoulder, big brown eyes glowing in the starlight, he watched the proceeding interestedly. At the last moment, Brother Van decided to lead the mules himself and to let Abinadab handle his own part of the work alone, and the horse apparently understood and approved the decision, for when Brother Van reached for the rein on the mule nearest him Abinadab gave his head a satisfied little shake and set his feet ready for the pull.

The squaw was still standing with her face turned toward the Indian village, listening. Brother Van touched her remindingly on the arm.

"Take a rock, Lubelle, and follow along behind," he directed softly. "When the wagon stops, place the rock behind the wheel. Do not wait for me to call, for that might awaken Miss Owen. The hill looks steep, but I am sure we can pull up it, especially if we take our time and let the mules rest when they wish."

Without a word the squaw took her place beside the rear of the wagon, a rock in the curve of her arm. Brother Van patted the shoulder of the mule, spoke

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to Abinadab and the wagon moved forward up the rough hill.

But presently on a steep place the off mule balked again. Lubelle was all for using drastic measures upon him, but Brother Van would not hear to it. Arlea awoke and descended from the wagon into the middle of the argument. Lubelle revered the fat little preacher, and in spite of her natural savagery and her eagerness to reach the end of the journey, she stood in awe of the driving flow of his eloquence. Her malevolence toward the mule was beaten into submission under the torrential outpour of Scriptural denunciations. Lubelle therefore wiped from her mind all thought of building a fire under the mule as she had first calmly proceeded to do, and stood stolidly waiting for Brother Van to move the mule with loving kindness.

Now, sweetness and compassion are wonderful solvents of difficulties, but a mule's nature does not readily respond to unaccustomed blandishments, nor does it quickly receive new impressions. Brother Van patted and coaxed in vain. So far as that particular mule was concerned, the little cavalcade had already reached journey's end, and to him it did not matter in the least that journey's end chanced to lie halfway up a steep, rocky hill.

Brother Van grew red in the face and was finally forced to unhitch the balky mule, unsaddle Abina-

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dab and hitch him in its place. By this means they managed to reach the top of the hill, though much time was consumed and an old moon rose languidly and shone down upon them before they were ready to go on.

From the Indian village across the creek rose a rhythmic uproar that halted Lubelle abruptly as she was about to climb into the wagon again and drive on. For several minutes she stood listening, the moonlight shining upon her face and revealing with startling effect its majestic symmetry. From the wagon seat Arlea leaned forward, listening to the tumult and watching the squaw's face, and even Brother Van held Abinadab quiet while he, too, listened uneasily.

"It is the Song of War that my people sing," Lubelle said at last in a repressed tone. "Arlea, you do not be afraid. I take care for you."

"Why, of course I'm not afraid! But I'm terribly tired and sleepy, Lubelle. It seems as though we would never get there. How far is it now?"

"Not far," Brother Van soothed her. "We were a long time on the hill. I think the rest of the way will be easy."

Lubelle muttered under her breath and stared away into the moonlight as she drove the mules forward. Drooped wearily in the saddle, Brother Van prayed to the God who had carried him safe over

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many a long trail; back among the quilts and her mother's feather bed, Arlea fell into troubled dreaming.

"Damn 'em, they're comin', all right!" Andy Porter exclaimed as he pushed into the store where every man in Whisky Flat stood waiting with the lights turned low. "I didn't think Wa-hi would have the gall to start a war dance. Must be something back of this performance. Milt, you ask Waunona what started Wa-hi off on the idea of burning her with old Sho-kup."

Waunona still sat huddled behind the counter, but she looked up when Milt Frisbee spoke to her, and her soft, whining voice rose and fell in the conversational sing-song of Indian women the West over. Milt listened, interrupted her now and then to ask a question, and at last turned to the crowd.

"I guess we're in for it, boys. Wa-hi is at his last ditch, and he'll fight unless we give up the squaw. She says he told the spirits that she had brought evil on the tribe; meanin', I suppose, that she's to blame for Sho-kup's kickin' off. Wa-hi done that, I gather, to save his own scalp. No tribe of Injuns will stand for their medicine man makin' a fizzle of drivin' out the bad spirits. They can fail twice, but the third time they've got to scare up a mighty good excuse if they want to go on livin'.

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That's the kind of fix Wa-hi's in now. Sho-kup died right in the middle of Wa-hi's medicine makin', and Waunona says it's the third time he's made a bad guess. If he can burn the squaw, the tribe'll go on believin' in him, and he'll be the next chief. If he can't, they'll turn on him like a rattler when you step on its tail."

"Give me a couple o' boxes of 45-70's, Burt, and lemme outside!" Kentucky Joe wheezed excitedly. "I don't care if this here is a rock buildin', I'm used to fightin' out in the open. I'll meet 'em down there by my corral. I'll fix 'em!"

Burt Gaylord, opening ammunition on the counter in the rear, pushed two boxes forward, at the same time shaking his head in opposition to the plan.

"Better stay here, Joe, till we see whether we have to fight or not. I don't believe they'll push matters quite that far. They must know what would happen as soon as the news reached Pioche. They aren't crazy enough to actually fight." Gaylord meant it. It did not seem possible that the lazy bucks who padded softly through the little mining camp; who sat for hours in the shade of the store smoking white men's tobacco and gambling for white men's money, would all at once revert to the old savage ways and come seeking scalps.

"Ain't, eh?" Kentucky Joe snorted while he filled his pockets with cartridges. "S'pose you think they

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was just joshin' Waunona about burning her with Sho-kup's dead body. You go ask the squaw whether they'll really fight or not!" He turned away and disappeared in the half light of the big room where men were waiting with grim faces and rifles clutched in their hands.

"I'll try 'em once more," Milt Frisbee volunteered. "To-sarke was all het up when he come with Wa-hi's message, and maybe he lost part of my answer on the way back. Kinda forgot, I guess. Wa-hi's bound to be along this time, and I'll talk to him straight. Better put the squaw down in the cellar with the other two women, hadn't you, Burt?"

At that moment the cellar door opened cautiously and the widow Jensen thrust her head into the room.

"Say! Me and Liz Porter ain't goin' to stay hived up in the dark down there without we've each of us got a gun," she sharply announced. "And you better be careful, too, about openin' this door when the fracas begins! Burt Gaylord, I want a shotgun and plenty o' buckshot. Anybody opens this door without rappin' three times quick and three times slow, is goin' to get a load of buckshot right slap in the face. They're comin' — I can hear 'em through the sullen window. Liz Porter says Andy's got to do his fightin' right back here next the sullen door."

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They gave her two shotguns, plenty of ammunition and Waunona Sho-kup. The widow Jensen retired into the cellar and the men stationed themselves at the portholes high up under the ceiling. The heavy iron shutters were closed and fastened over the windows and the stout wooden doors were barred.

Whisky Flat was ready for battle or for siege.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MEDICINE MAN

DOWN by the stone corral which had come into the possession of Kentucky Joe through no especial industry of his own, the roar of a 45-70 rifle brought the men in the store alert with rifle barrels thrust through the portholes and fingers crooked upon triggers. Milt Frisbee swore.

“Who let that fool Joe outside?” he cried angrily. “Joe’d build a scrap any time just for the fun of fightin’! He’s started ’em off now — there’ll be no stoppin’ ’em!”

Down by the corral other shots were fired, and there was much yelling. The sounds boded ill for Joe, but before any one could go to his rescue the yelling of the Indians swept up the roadway. Evidently they guessed that the clash would come at the store, for presently the moonlight revealed flitting figures that merged into the black shade of the nearest buildings; an empty saloon, a small storehouse and another building left vacant when the first mining boom swept on out of the valley and left Whisky Flat in the backwash of little mines and prospect holes.

The Medicine Man

"Now, boys," Milt Frisbee called to the men perched against the wall where they could peer through the slits, "just keep in mind that we're fightin' in self-defense. Don't shoot unless you have to, but let the Injuns force the game right along. We ain't in any danger here, and we can stand 'em off a long while. We don't want the government bellerin' around at us after the fracas is over, so hold your fire and watch your dodgers. We don't give up the squaw, but we don't kill anybody, either, if we can help it."

"That's a hell of a notion!" a Lucky Chance man muttered. But he had for months worked under Milt Frisbee's orders, so although he might grumble, the fellow did not shoot.

For some time the affair stood at deadlock. The men fortified in the store occasionally glimpsed a slinking form as it moved uneasily from one patch of shade to another. The shadows were astir with vague movement. Farther off voices could be heard in staccato commands or argument, but the Indians did not rush the building. The moonlight must have told them plainly enough that the windows were shuttered, and no especial intelligence was required to know that the besieged were ready and waiting.

Then, without any warning, a fusillade of shots was fired from the outbuildings. Bullets spat

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against the rock walls of the store. The rifles within gave sharp answer, but the men purposely shot high and the Indians yelled in derision. Five minutes of silence and the uproar was repeated, again without effect. After that, a long fifteen minutes dragged past.

"They're too darned quiet about it," Milt Frisbee complained to Gaylord. "Sounds to me like they're just bluffin' along till daylight. They know darn well they can't get at us in the dark, and we can't do much to them. Wonder where Wa-hi is at?"

"I don't see what we can do but wait their move," Gaylord answered. "Up to now, dignity is trumps in this game. We've got the squaw, and we're standing pat. That's about all we can do, isn't it, Milt?"

"That's about all," Milt reluctantly agreed. "It's darn hard on the temper, though. What I'd like to do is get right out there with the boys and chase 'em back to their camp. Come daylight, that would be a good move."

Almost as if they had heard him, the Indians set up a clamor that could be heard all up and down the valley. It was the war cry of the Shoshones, and was followed by a steady firing. A man standing carelessly behind a loophole jolted backward with a bullet in his shoulder. Evidently the lazy, gam-

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bling bucks had not failed to observe the exact position of those loopholes, and had aimed with deadly intent. There was no stopping the miners after that, though the light was tricky and the Indians scattered before the deadly firing of the white men.

Silence again settled over the little town. The moon rode high among the stars and the shadows that had concealed the warriors were shrinking fast as the hard-packed open space beside the store was bathed in a pale radiance. The Indians must now seek shelter farther off or stand out boldly where all could see.

Finally a murmuring sound of many voices rose — intermittently at first, swelling to a tumult. The white men, warned by Milt Frisbee, held their fire and waited. Presently an Indian left the deep shadow that lay beyond the saloon and walked slowly forward, both hands upraised with palms turned outward.

“Wa-hi!” grunted Milt Frisbee. “Time the dirty pup was comin’ to the front for a powwow!”

In all the savage trappings of his race and cult, Wa-hi stood bold in the full light of the moon, facing the stone walls of the store. His feathered headdress drooped gracefully backward from his haughty brow; his eyes gleamed restlessly as he searched for some sign of recognition, some tribute to his magnificence. The necklaces draped over his

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chest, all the jingling bangles on his arms and anklets were noiseless, so motionless he stood.

"What does Wa-hi want?" at last Milt Frisbee called unemotionally in the Shoshone tongue.

"Wa-hi wants the squaw who called the bad spirits to the bed of Sho-kup!" Like a bell that knows but one tone, Wa-hi's voice had the full, resonant cadence that had echoed from the hills at sunset.

"Wa-hi cannot have the squaw," Milt Frisbee retorted after a dignified pause. "The white men are friends of the Indians. Let all the Indians listen!" he shouted through the porthole. "This is the truth which I speak to you now:

"Wa-hi's people know that Wa-hi speaks with a forked tongue. Three times has Wa-hi's medicine failed him. Three times has death come when Wa-hi made medicine for life. Wa-hi is afraid. He knows the punishment that will come to him because the spirits have covered their faces from him. His heart is black with fear. His face should be painted black also by his people. Because Wa-hi knows that his medicine is weak, Wa-hi would take the life of a woman. Waunona did not call the bad spirits to Sho-kup. Wa-hi called the bad spirits, and Wa-hi must pay."

"The white man speaks like a child!" Wa-hi retorted arrogantly. "What does the white man

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know of Indian law? He bellows like the wind in tree tops. He shouts words that have no meaning. He is a greater fool than Wa-hi believed. Wa-hi is not a fool. Wa-hi's medicine is strong. It brought him two prisoners for the one squaw which the white men have stolen and hidden away. Will the white men give up the squaw to serve Sho-kup on the long journey? Or shall Wa-hi send him two white slaves instead to serve him? A white maiden and a white priest, such as will appease the angry spirits that have demanded that Waunona shall take the fire trail after Sho-kup! Shall Wa-hi send these to be the slaves of Sho-kup? "

"Wa-hi is a liar!" Milt Frisbee's face turned purple with rage.

"Will the white men give us Waunona?"

"No! We'll give you hell in just about two minutes, you dirty, lousy pup!" There is a limit to dignity, even when dignity is trumps. Milt's wrath spilled over into vigorous, pioneer English.

"The white man's hell is very hot," grinned Wa-hi with a snarl in his voice. "Wa-hi will see that his prisoners taste the white man's hell as they take the trail after Sho-kup. The white girl will try to put out the fire with her tears! Wa-hi will make it very hot, for her tears will be like rain when the thunder god is angry!"

"For God's sake, Milt, what's he saying about a

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white girl?" Gaylord plucked at Milt's sleeve. "Do you suppose ——"

"Just one of Wa-hi's lies," Milt told him brusquely. "He's bluffing to save his own hide."

"But what does he say?"

"Says his medicine has sent him two white prisoners for the squaw we stole. Says one is a girl and ——"

"Milt, we can't take a chance. What if it's true?"

"How can it be true? Burt, there ain't a white girl in the whole valley. The only two white women are Andy Porter's wife and the widow Jensen, and they're down cellar. Don't be a fool! Wa-hi's foxy enough to know the bluff that would make us lay down our hands quickest. If he can put it over, the bucks will all think he's big medicine and he'll lord it over us till we can't live in the valley with 'em."

"Tell him — wait! I'll tell him myself. He knows enough English when he wants to." Burt Gaylord moved a step along the narrow platform that served as a shelf in the store in times of peace, and pressed his face close up against the loophole nearest him.

"Damn you, Wa-hi, don't you try to run a bluff like that! White girl, call out your name!" he shouted.

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From the shadows beyond the storeroom came a shrill cry that was instantly muffled as if a hand was clapped over the mouth that called. In the store men looked at one another uneasily.

"That was a woman that hollered, sure as hell," one muttered to the man nearest him.

"Ho, white men! Wa-hi does not lie!" the medicine man's voice gloated. "The white girl will cry louder than that when she takes the spirit trail!"

"It was a squaw," Milt Frisbee contended. "A squaw or a boy. There ain't any white girl, I'd stake my life on it."

"You can stake your life on whatever else you like," Burt snapped back at him. "But you can't stake the life of any white woman — or man, either." He turned again to the narrow slit in the wall.

"Wa-hi! If you have white prisoners, let them stand out here in the moonlight where we can see! The white man's God will judge you — and He is the God of your spirits, good and bad!"

There was a moment when the stillness was so great that the gurgle of water running over rocks in the ditch that had been cut through from the river was heard distinctly. Wa-hi drew himself up so that the curve of his ribs showed plainly on his lean body. He laughed a loud, mocking laugh with his face turned up to the full gaze of the moon.

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“Wa-hi’s medicine is stronger than the white man’s God!” he cried in his deepest, most impressive tone that sounded like a bell in the silence. “He cannot judge Wa-hi, for He must hide His face when Wa-hi speaks. Wa-hi spits in the face of the white man’s God!”

From somewhere in the darkness came a blinding flash and a great roar. Wa-hi leaped high into the air, clutched wildly at nothing — or perhaps at the life that was being wrenched from him — and went down on his face; writhed there ineffectively for a moment, gave a convulsive kick and lay still.

The absolute silence that follows a wholly unexpected dénouement held white men and Indians alike. Milt Frisbee was the first to recover himself.

“Wa-hi’s medicine is weak as the water that sleeps on the grass until the sun comes and frightens it away,” he called out gravely. “The white man’s God has judged Wa-hi. Take him away and send him along the spirit trail to be the servant of your chief, Sho-kup!”

There was a stir among the Indians, but none came forward to lift the mangled body of their medicine man. Then an Indian walked out and stood with his arms folded, the dead man at his feet. While one might count twenty very slowly he stood — for such is the Indian way. Then:

“I am Que-ta-pat-so, son of Sho-kup who has

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taken the spirit trail. I am the son of Waunona who was the wife of Sho-kup. I am the friend of the white men. Many times I have brought meat to show my friendship. Many times the white men have laid gifts in my hand. My heart is good. I shake the white men by the hand. I say let there be no more talk of killing. The white man's God has punished Wa-hi who would spit on the face of that God. It is good.

"I am Que-ta-pat-so, son of Sho-kup. Say to Waunona that my heart is soft to my mother. Say that she will sit in my lodge when I am chief. Say that we go now to send my father Sho-kup along the trail of Spirits. Say that Wa-hi the Fox will go to be the servant of Sho-kup and tend the horses of my father. Say that the dawn comes soon. Waunona should sit with the women and weep for Sho-kup who was my father."

Milt Frisbee gave the gist of the speech to the group pressed close behind him.

"Sounds more like it," Milt commented when Que-ta-pat-so had finished and stood waiting with his arms folded and his eyes staring straight before him. "That young buck means business. Better go bring up the squaw, some of you. Tell her there ain't no more Wa-hi, and Que-ta-pat-so has just announced that he's a candidate for office. If I'm any judge, he's the next chief. Bring her

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along." He turned to the loophole and called through it:

"If Wa-hi spoke the truth, and you have white prisoners, bring them safe to us to show that your heart is good!"

"We have no white prisoners," Que-ta-pat-so called back stiffly. "Wa-hi the Fox did many foolish things. We are the friends of the white man. Our friends are not our enemies and we do not make them captive."

"Foxy boy, that," Gaylord opined when Milt translated. "If he's got anybody out there, and should turn them over in exchange for the squaw, I suppose he thinks that would make him technically responsible. Tell him, Milt, to show his white visitors how to find the door of his white friends. Make it flowery, but make it damned plain."

"We have no prisoners," Que-ta-pat-so repeated. "My friends the white men may open their doors and take the iron from their windows and fear nothing. Their friends wait for Waunona. They would go away to their lodges, for their hearts are heavy with sorrow. A great chief has left them."

"The squaw ain't in the sullen," Andy Porter announced, coming up hurriedly through the gloom. "Liz says there's a door at the back that lets yuh out amongst them rocks on the hill, here. I never knowed it before — did you, Burt?"

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"I did, but I thought I had it pretty well blocked up," Gaylord confessed. "I was guarding against thieves coming in, though, and not against some one going out that way." He looked queerly at Milt. "It was a shotgun that killed Wa-hi. Wonder if it wasn't the squaw! Would we dare let the Injuns know she shot him?"

Milt Frisbee considered that, keeping an eye on the Indian outside.

"Your friends the white men sorrow with you," he called mendaciously through the loophole. "Your friends will give two red blankets for the burning. Now Wa-hi has gone to join the bad spirits, and only friends are left. Waunona is not here. When you go to your lodges perhaps you will find her there. We will shake the hand of Que-ta-pat-so, and we will give two red blankets to the chief Sho-kup to take with him on his journey."

"I shake you by the hand," the Indian gravely responded. "Do the white men know where Waunona has gone?"

"We do not know. We think she sits in her lodge weeping for Sho-kup."

"Huh!" Evidently the Indian had his own ideas upon that subject. "Waunona's tracks come here without Waunona. Perhaps the tracks have gone home now. Sho-kup is glad for two red blankets."

"That means he'll take our word for it and go on

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home if we give him the blankets." Milt heaved a sigh of relief. "We'll take up a collection and pay you cost price for them, Burt. Make 'em the best you've got — Injuns ain't so easy fooled as some folks may think."

"And what about them white prisoners?" some one asked.

"He says they ain't got any prisoners. I believe it, too. Anyway, the best way in the world to fix things up is with presents. They're takin' away Wa-hi's body, so that means the fracas is all over. We got out of it lucky."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BURNING

QUE-TA-PAT-SO stood in the roadway before the steps of the porch with two red blankets draped over his left arm, leaving the other free for polite gesticulations indicating friendship for his white brothers, white-souled loyalty to his friends and the grave dignity of grief befitting a warrior who is soon to become chief of his tribe now in mourning for his father.

"White visitors come," he announced at the close of his harangue. "The white priest will be welcome in our village when the time of mourning is past. Now the heart of Que-ta-pat-so is very sad. He would return to his lodge that he may weep for his father who is gone." For a moment longer he stood upright, staring straight before him. Then with majestic calm he turned and strode away down the road, his followers trailing after him like a wolf pack running silent under the moon.

From just beyond the storehouse came the cluck of a loaded wagon, and the dispirited mule team moved up and halted where the Indian had stood three minutes before. Brother Van rode forward

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and dismounted, lifted Arlea to the ground and led her up the steps, where a score of men stood staring in astonishment.

“Lord bless you, my dear friends!” Brother Van cried heartily, advancing upon Burt Gaylord with a broad smile and his hand outstretched. “I have here a young orphan who is seeking her uncle. Miss Arlea Owen is her name, and mine is Van Osborne, commonly called Brother Van by white men and red, from Salt Lake City to Sacramento. In the wagon sits Miss Owen’s servant, a Shoshone woman by the name of Lubelle Wan-washe. We have travelled far—from Palisade, where Miss Owen lost both her parents, to Pioche in search of her uncle. There we learned that a man who may possibly be the one we wish to find left for this district some months ago. Enough of that now; our errand here can well rest in abeyance for the time being. What we most need is food and shelter.”

“The best we have is yours and welcome,” said Gaylord hospitably, his keen eyes darting more than once to the drawn face of the girl. “Gaylord is my name, and I am temporarily in charge of the store and the post-office here. This is my friend, Mr. Frisbee, owner of the Lucky Chance mine a few miles back in the hills. I am afraid you have just passed through an unpleasant experience with the

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Indians. Did they attempt to hold you as prisoners? ”

“Something of the sort may have been their intention at first,” Brother Van admitted with a whimsical twist of the lips. “But the Lord is always with them that fear Him. With His mighty arm as shield and buckler, these poor ignorant savages could do us no injury. My young charge here was just a bit frightened, though I assured her that not a hair of her head could fall without our Father’s knowledge.”

“God has let every terrible thing He could think of happen to me without ever lifting a finger!” Arlea cried hysterically to Brother Van, ignoring altogether the score of strange faces about her. “If God knows every wicked thing, why doesn’t He *do* something? Lubelle said they wouldn’t hurt us, but an Indian felt of my hair and laughed! He made signs of scalping me! Oh, I hate this country!” She broke into unforeseen, bitter weeping that was smothered presently in the widow Jensen’s capacious embrace.

“The child is worn out,” Brother Van apologized. “What she needs is a thorough rest.”

“There’s a good room in the hotel,” said the widow Jensen, patting Arlea’s heaving shoulders. “The one at the end of the hall I’m thinkin’ of. Give me back my shotgun and I’ll take the child

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over there and put her to bed. Where's Joe? He'd better close the saloon for the night — or at least run it quiet so the young lady can sleep. And I want hot water and plenty of it, and I'll take a look to the beddin', myself. Does any man know where Kentucky Joe is? Tell 'im he's wanted by the widow Jensen. Tell 'im he's a most particular guest to his best room."

"Somebody run down to the corral and see what happened to Joe," Burt Gaylord commanded the crowd. "There was shooting down in that direction, remember." He watched half a dozen men start down that way at a run, their heavy miners boots clumping on the hard-packed earth like a troop of cavalry. "Most of us stop at the hotel," he explained, turning to Brother Van. "There are not many of us except on pay day, and the hotel was built when they thought the town was going to boom. I'll see that you have a good room, Brother Van Osborne. There are twice as many rooms as there are people to use them. The squaw can have a place near her mistress."

"Well, let's be movin' over there and not stand gabbin' here the rest of the night," the widow Jensen suggested tartly. "It's the room at the end of the hall the young lady shall have, and if Joe don't like it he can lump it! There's a grand, good bed in that room, and the best rockin' chair in Whisky

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Flat, and the window looks out upon White Pine peak with its white cross the good God put there with the snow. 'Tis gazin' on that she should be when she opens her eyes in the morning, and not on the pigs rootin' up the earth in the Gallopin' Swede's back yard. And the squaw," she added dictatorially, "shall have the small room next to it in case she should be wanted to fetch and carry for the young lady." With that she led Arlea away toward the hotel that bulked square and unlovely beside the trail a few yards distant.

From the opposite direction a group appeared, vaguely at first as moving shadows, then taking form and motion as the men drew closer in the moonlight. From their midst came an unmistakable, whistling wheeze.

"That's Joe," some one on the porch shrewdly deduced.

Joe it was, walking in the lead, swinging his arms like a man mowing grass with a scythe, puffing and boasting about how he had put the damned Injuns on the run. Three times he had told his story before he reached the steps, and now he insisted upon telling it for the fourth time, even though no one made any pretence of listening.

"And the house'll stand a drink all around to celebrate the battle," he finished with a self-satisfied snort. "Come on, boys, over to the saloon. Ken-

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tucky Joe will set 'em up and he'll not question the size nor the kind of the drinks."

"You'll set 'em up to-morrow, Joe," Andy Porter declared mockingly. "Your saloon is closed for the night, and you've got your orders to go straight to bed and be careful and don't drop your boots on the floor."

Kentucky Joe, a big man with sagging paunch and a distressing case of asthma, halted and stared belligerently from Andy Porter's solemn countenance to the drooping figure of the fat little preacher who was being conveyed toward the hotel by Burt Gaylord.

"And who is it that's so kind and condescendin' as to close my saloon for me?" he demanded heavily, and paused to puff and blow and whistle through his teeth. "That a preacher, goin' off with Burt? Some of his work, eh? Come in here and try to tell me how to run my business, eh?"

"It ain't the preacher, Joe. The widder Jensen left word that you was to shet up shop fer the night. Them's your orders."

"Did, eh? What business has the widder Jensen got tellin' me what I shall do and how I'll do it? She can run the rest of the town, mebby — but danged if she'll run me! Whatever put that into her head? Knows it's pay day, I s'pose, and hates to see me earn an honest dollar! Here I been down

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at that corral fightin' Injuns all night — savin' her scalp for her, mebby — and here she tells me ——”

“It's a young lady that just come with the preacher, Joe. All tired out and sick and had a scare with the Injuns. The widder Jensen wants it quiet so the young lady can sleep. Pretty good idea, too. Guess the boys has had fun enough for one night. Jim Wilbur got a bullet in his shoulder, and I guess he'd kinda like it quiet around here, too. What say we all hunt our blankets, boys?”

Milt Frisbee started for the hotel as if he, for one, meant to set the example.

“Hey!” Kentucky Joe called anxiously after Milt. “Ain't you goin' to put out no guard around this town? Want us all to be scalped in our beds?”

Milt slowed, looking back over his shoulder.

“Go on to bed, Joe, and don't worry none about your scalp,” he called. “If you know anything at all about Indians, you know every mother's son of 'em is busy gettin' ready for the big burning. We're safe as God's pocket, and we don't need no guard.” He turned and strode on to the hotel, and the men at the store straggled after him.

Whisky Flat presently lay quiet as the hills behind the town; steeped in slumber, each rude building glorified by the magic half-lights and shadows of the waning moon.

CHAPTER SIX

NAME UNKNOWN

GAYLORD turned the great key in the lock and went into the velvety blackness of the store, struck a sulphur match and lighted his way to the nearest sperm candle. The yellow glow struck bleakly upon rifles, boxes of cartridges, all the warlike disorder of a fight suddenly abandoned. On the counter beside the candle stood a basin of bloody water, mute reminder of Jim Wilbur's arrow wound. Gaylord stooped and picked up a blood-stained cloth, walked to the fireplace and thrust it in upon the coals from the last fire; stood there staring preoccupiedly while it turned black around the edges, sending up little spirals of smoke before it burst suddenly into flame; thought bitterly that so do the mistakes of a man's past life blacken first his memory, then destroy with consuming flames of remorse his dearest plans. When the cloth was charred black he sighed, picked up the candle and turned away toward the post-office corner where stood the great brass-bound chest that was the depositary for most of the valuables of the town.

In the absence of Gaston Roche, his partner and half-owner of the store, Gaylord held the only key in Whisky Flat that would open that chest. He

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dropped to one knee beside it, unlocked the two heavy hasps and threw back the lid, raising the candle so that he might look within at the neat rows of little wooden boxes, the names of the temporary owners pencilled upon the unpainted lids; at the tied packages of letters, buckskin bags that held nuggets, gold dust and various articles of jewelry placed there for safe-keeping. With a custodian's careful appraisal of the chest's contents his eyes scanned each in turn before his hand went to a box in the lower right-hand corner, lifted it out and set it on the floor.

Melted sperm oil dripped upon his boot toe as Gaylord tilted the candle to read what was written on the box immediately beneath his own.

"Property of man murdered on the night of June 10, 1874. Name unknown. Rat-eye Williams hung for same, June 11th after fair trial," he read. "Contents of this box held until called for by relation of dead man. Description, height 5 ft., 10 in., hair dark, beard dark, eyes blue, teeth even and good. Age unknown, might be anywhere between 35 or 45 yrs. old. Weight about 200 lbs. Contents of this box was taken off Rat-eye Williams who confessed to murder and robbery."

Gaylord's short laugh held little of mirth as he lifted the box and looked at it speculatively, rose, set the two boxes on the ink-stained table at his

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elbow, picked up the candle and placed it beside them.

What grim jests the gods made sometimes of the lives of men! The poor treasures of two whose lives had been taken and twisted out of the grooves ambition had sought to chisel for them lay here side by side on a crude pine table in the corner of a crude little store in one of the most isolated valleys in all the far-flung wilderness of the infant State of Nevada. Even now Burt Gaylord was conscious of an inward shudder when he remembered how he himself had been accused of murdering this unknown man, and how nearly, in its zeal for swift justice, Whisky Flat had come to hanging him. He never had looked through this box, but he meant to do so now even though his first intention had been to go through his own meager assortment of old letters and pictures (somewhat faded and travel-stained but valued nevertheless as his one connecting link with his past).

Almost with aversion he chose a small photograph and held it cupped in his palm close to the candle flame. Hoop-skirted, smooth-haired and smiling, with a great cameo brooch pinned with mathematical precision just under her chin, a girl's face smiled up at him; a face not unlike the girl who had upbraided God for His indifference to her suffering, there on the store steps not an hour before. An-

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other photograph he took from the box and held beside the first. This was a boy, whose rounded features somewhat resembled the girl. Coat buttoned to the neck like a preacher, with his hair roached up in a crested wave on the top of his head and combed sleekly back from his ears; solemn with the terrible gravity of youth; terribly straight, stiff as any lay-figure in a clothing-store window.

Gaylord turned the first picture over and looked at the back where was inscribed, in the fine sloped handwriting of the old Spencerian school, "From Arlea to her baby brother on his twelfth birthday." On the back of the other picture nothing at all was written, though the photographer's ornately scrolled firm name and address were identical on both mountings. For some time he studied the two photographs abstractedly before he tossed them into the box.

Now his mood had changed and he no longer wanted to pry into any man's past. As if the very sight of the boxes recalled too many bitter memories he replaced them in the chest, closed and locked it. But that act could not rid him of the black mood that had descended upon his soul, nor dim the pictures that flashed in vivid semblance of reality upon his unwilling mind. As was his habit on the nights following mine pay days when Kentucky Joe's guests made merry with much shouting in the saloon be-

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neath his room, Burt made up the rawhide-thonged couch in the little office, where the thick rock walls of the store building shut out the noises from the hotel; a needless precaution against disturbance on this particular night, for the widow Jensen's edict was being rigorously enforced and Whisky Flat might have been a deserted village for all the noise it made.

He had forgotten to lock the door, and so it was Milt Frisbee's firm grasp of his shoulder that roused him from the heavy sleep which dawn had brought.

"Hey! Breakfast's over, and the boys want to know if you think they ought to hang around and see if the Injuns'll come sneakin' up here lookin' for more trouble. With the young lady here, and all, they feel like mebbly it ain't proper to go off to the mines again until they know for shore that everything's safe. There ain't enough of you regular city folks here in the Flat to stand off them bucks if they go on the war path again, but they'd like to know what you think. How about it? Don't you think we ought to stay over another night and not take any chances?"

Gaylord sat up struggling to rid himself of an exceedingly unpleasant dream; a dream of that day last spring when his life had hung for some hours on Whisky Flat's whim, with this same Milt Frisbee for his sole defender — and none too willing a

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champion at that. His penetrating blue eyes held a dazed look that struck Milt as being very funny.

"Wake up, chief! If you hurry, maybe you'll be in time to eat breakfast with the prettiest girl in Nevada. The preacher's up and prognosticatin' around lookin' for a soul that needs savin'. Asked about you first thing." His eyes crinkled nearly shut with laughter. "Say, Burt, how long has it been since you heard the blessin' asked? You don't want to forget your manners and go forkin' flap-jacks onto your plate the minute you set down or he'll think you ain't worth savin'. Remember, you're eatin' with a preacher, and don't make any breaks."

"I think perhaps I know more about preachers than you do." Burt stood up and reached for his coat. "Altogether too much. I hoped I had gotten far enough away from civilization so that I would never see another one of the breed."

"For a feller that ain't got no use for preachers, that address of welcome you handed out last night was shore eloquent," Milt gibed. "I suppose that was for the young lady's benefit, though. Well, I'll mog over and tell 'em you're comin' in a minute."

"No, you hold on until I'm ready to go. Never mind the preacher — his stay in the valley will be short and sweet if I have anything to say about it. What about the Indians, Milt? I know they're busy

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now with old Sho-kup's burning, and that will hold them for a day or two, probably. But do you suppose they'll try to stir up something after the funeral excitement is over? Que-ta-pat-so himself is all right, I believe, but just how strong is he? Do you think he can hold those bucks in line if they once get it into their heads to make trouble?"

Milt sat down on the edge of the table and folded his arms. There was no hurry, since Gaylord plainly meant to shave—an affectation, in the opinion of Milt Frisbee who took off his whiskers every Sunday morning and considered that sufficiently fastidious for any occasion.

"It ain't a question of strength, Burt. If Que-ta-pat-so has got enough of what you call diplomacy in his make-up, he can handle anything that is likely to come up. He shore ain't got the war record old Sho-kup had, and that's what makes for strength in a chief unless he's foxy enough to hold his tribe with common sense and oratory."

Gaylord had lighted a handful of shavings and small twigs in the fireplace and was heating water by the simple method of setting a small iron pot directly on the fire. He now brought it steaming to the table.

"That certainly was a diplomatic handling of a ticklish situation last night," he observed, looking up from making lather in his shaving mug. "You

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remember how he denied having any white prisoners at all, when we know that the preacher and the girl were probably being held in the background while he was talking. That, or they had just been turned loose. Looking at it from one point of view, he's a diplomat; from another, he's the prince of liars."

"He knew he was lying about the squaw," Milt reminded him. "I'd call it a diplomatic conference all the way through. And from the way Que-ta-pat-so handled the thing, I'm just about ready to bank on him. Take 'em as a whole, the Injuns are all right — or they will be now Wa-hi's out of the way. He was a devil, and he had a bunch around him that would do anything he said. There's one I don't go much on and that's To-sarke. He'd like to be another Wa-hi, I believe, but Que-ta-pat-so has got the upper hand now, and he'll likely keep it. Anyway," he added after a pause while he filled his pipe, "they'll be off in the hills as soon as they're through powwowin' over Sho-kup. They've got their winter's meat to get, and it looks to me like there's a change brewin' in the weather."

"But about the boys stayin' over another day or so," he changed the subject with the first puff of smoke from his pipe. "They want to, and I guess it's just as well to encourage the idea. Here's this young lady, come all the way from Palisade lookin' for her uncle. I don't know the particulars yet, any

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more'n what the preacher let out accidental by sayin' he's likely a drinkin', gamblin' cuss, and the girl wants to find him and try and persuade him to take her back home and make a fresh start livin' a kinda decent life in their home town. That's what her mother asked her to do. I thought mebby the boys might be able to help her out a little when the subject's put right up to 'em. Some of 'em might mebby've met him. It'll be snatchin' a brand from the burnin', accordin' to the preacher, if she can find him and get him away from his wicked life and reform him. Come on — ain't you about done primpin', Burt?"

Gaylord stood scowling into the little square looking-glass, the razor poised over a cut on his chin. "I wonder why it never occurs to meddlesome souls that perhaps the brand may not want to be snatched from the burning!" Meditatively he applied an astringent lotion to the cut, wiped his face carefully and stood back for a general inspection.

"Heaven would be better populated," he cynically declared, "if the righteous would only leave off trying to drag poor devils up to the pearly gates by the scruff of the neck. That's why," he added, "I don't love preachers. However, the law of hospitality is even more binding than the decalogue. Come on, Milt. Brother Van Osborne must not breakfast without his host."

CHAPTER SEVEN

LOST, ONE BLACK SHEEP

GAYLORD had not finished his first piece of venison tenderloin before he decided that a Methodist preacher may possibly be altogether human. Brother Van would actually have omitted saying grace — at least aloud — if Gaylord himself had not indicated by a somewhat formal bow that he expected the little ceremony to be performed. And although the deep, musical voice might have rolled sonorously from some high pulpit, and aroused all of Gaylord's latent antagonism toward the Church, he rose from the table feeling that while he still had no use for preachers or the creed they taught, Brother Van himself was not a bad sort. At least he had refrained from any open attempt to save Gaylord's soul and had talked of things any man would find interesting.

“And now, Mr. Gaylord, if I may encroach upon your valuable time for half an hour or so, I should like to have a little talk with you upon a matter that concerns my young charge, Miss Owen. By making our mission plain to you before she appears upon the scene, I can perhaps save her from a distressing conversation.” He turned his head quickly as Arlea came down the stairs, her eyes fixed inquir-

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ingly upon the two standing beside the roughhewn newel post. "Ah!" he added with some chagrin, "here is the young lady now, looking as fresh as a May morning in an apple orchard!"

"I wish you wouldn't remind me of apple orchards, or May mornings, or fib about my freshness," Arlea protested with an ironic twist of her lips. "I feel perfectly wretched, and the sky is bleak and stormy and I doubt if there ever was an apple orchard. Good morning, Mr. ——"

"Gaylord," Burt reminded her with a polite inclination of the head. That he was not a ladies' man was plainly indicated by every tone and gesture, though his eyes dwelt upon the girl's face with quiet scrutiny.

"Mr. Gaylord and I were just going to hold a little confab about our mission here, Miss Owen," the preacher put in smoothly. "You will want your breakfast, of course ——"

"No, Brother Van, I've had all the breakfast I want. Lubelle brought me something before I was up. She tried to convince me that I ought to stay in bed to-day, but I simply can't rest until I know for certain whether my uncle is in this place or whether I'll have to go on searching indefinitely. Mother always taught me not to put off a distasteful task, so I'll join your confab, if you please, Brother Van."

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"Distasteful?" Gaylord's eyebrows went up.

"Yes, distasteful! I detest poking about in this country, from one horrible camp to another — and then, if we find my uncle, it will probably be worse than if I hadn't. Distasteful is the mildest word I can honestly use, Mr. Gaylord."

"Now, now, you should not assume that attitude, Miss Owen. Who can tell what the years may have brought your uncle in the way of remorse — even of wisdom and righteousness? You may be doing him a great injustice, my dear young lady, by assuming that he is still walking in the broad road that leads to destruction."

"Well, perhaps you're right," Arlea grudgingly conceded. "I'm sure I hope so." She followed Gaylord into the gloomy parlor where a fire was burning in deference to her presence in the hotel.

"You mustn't think I'm harsh and unforgiving, Mr. Gaylord. I simply hate this country and everything in it. And now I have to find an uncle who will probably be simply a disgrace and no comfort at all. You see, he was disowned by his whole family when he was just about to finish college, and with good reason, I'm sure. He was expelled from college for drinking and gambling with cards, which broke my grandfather's heart — grandfather was a minister, you know, and the disgrace of having a son like Uncle Albert almost killed him. Grand-

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mother, fortunately, had died before all this came upon the family, and my mother had to bear the brunt of the disgrace. I do hope you'll pardon my referring to it; I merely want to explain why I feel as I do toward my uncle.

"Mother was always very bitter toward Uncle Albert, naturally. She never mentioned his name to me or to any one else until she lay on her death-bed. Then she was so worried over leaving me alone that she told me about Uncle Albert. He had been seen out here in this country, she said, and he was supposed to be pretty well off — had made money somehow in the mines. Of course it was all hearsay; some man had told father that he had seen Uncle Albert in Pioche about a year ago. He didn't have a chance to talk with him but he was sure that it was Uncle Albert. So mother made me promise her that I would try and find him and persuade him to take me back home and lead a respectable life from now on. It would be helping him to retrieve his lost character and would also provide me with some one who would take care of me — though for my part I should much prefer to look after myself. We went to Pioche after mother died. Brother Van was kind enough to escort me, and of course I have Lubelle, who has been much more than a servant to me. My own mother couldn't have been kinder than she has been. But

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in Pioche we couldn't find Uncle Albert, though some one told Brother Van that a stranger who answered Uncle Albert's description had started up this way, saying he meant to look over the ground in Whisky Flat. It was a very slender clew, but we followed it and here we are. My uncle's name," she added as an afterthought, "is Albert G. Elwood, if he hasn't changed it. So if you know of any stranger who came into this valley a few months ago, he may possibly be that lost black sheep whom I am expected to save."

"Black sheep are over plentiful in the West," Gaylord said dryly. "Moreover, they are usually better lost than found, I believe. It strikes me that you are really hoping you will not succeed in finding your uncle."

Arlea gave him a quick look.

"I want to keep the promise I made to mother," she said with a little sigh. "And I want to go back home, too. If I can find my uncle, he'll have to take me home, of course. I'm afraid to make the trip alone, and I promised mother I wouldn't attempt it."

"But what if your uncle should not want to go back?" Gaylord's eyes were very blue and keen, and he looked at her as if he were trying to read the thoughts hidden away behind her words.

"He'll have to, whether he likes it or not." Ar-

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lea's lips closed firmly upon the sentence. "He surely wouldn't expect me to stay in this country. In common decency he'd have to take me home."

"But I infer that you do not expect common decency from him."

"Well, as Brother Van insists upon reminding me, he may have changed since he disgraced the family and ran away out West somewhere. I hope so, and of course it's my duty to find him."

"It's your duty to make the attempt," Gaylord corrected her dryly. "And I am afraid I can't lead him to your obviously reluctant presence. So far as I know, there never has been an Albert G. Elwood in Whisky Flat. There was a man last spring — no one ever discovered what his name was. He was killed, murdered by his packer. You evidently have a description of your uncle, and perhaps we had better go over to the store and look through the box that contains this man's belongings. As I say, his name was never discovered, but I believe his description was carefully noted, in case relatives should later appear. He had quite a sum of money on his person — enough to make the crime seem worth while to his murderer." Gaylord's mouth tilted downward at the corners.

"I — I — murdered? Why — it *couldn't* be Uncle Albert!" Arlea stared into Gaylord's set face, looked appealingly at Brother Van.

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"I think," the little preacher said firmly, "we'd better have a look, Miss Owen. It can do no harm, though probably we shall learn nothing that will be of any help in finding your uncle." He turned to Gaylord with a deprecating gesture. "If it won't be too much trouble," he added.

Gaylord bowed slightly and led the way to the store, walking with head erect and shoulders squared as if his own task was quite as disagreeable as the girl's, and he feared that his determination to carry it through might weaken if he went laggard to face the issue.

Arlea halted in the doorway, taking in all the disorder with one sweeping glance.

"Oh! Fighting — how I hate it! And there's blood on that bench! Savages ——" Arlea laid a palm tightly across her eyes, and drew a sharp breath. "I can't stand much more of this sort of thing, Brother Van. I can't!"

Gaylord looked at her disapprovingly, his brows drawn together.

"The finest, bravest women I ever knew were raised daintily in sheltered Eastern homes and came out into this savage wilderness — and stood shoulder to shoulder with their men," he said sternly. "Miss Owen, *any* woman can whine. It is not the grace of form or the beauty of perfect features that win, out here. It is the fine courage of our women, the

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saintly fortitude that make the men feel that this wonderful country is worth fighting for! ”

He left them staring after him; gazing too at the litter of guns and ammunition, mute testimony of the truth of his words and reality of their nightmare experience. Alone he went into the post-office, unlocked the great chest, stooped and fumbled within. They were still standing where he had left them when he returned bearing in his two hands the box with its grim inscription.

“ Here is the sole evidence we have of the man I spoke of. On the outside is a description of him,” he said more gently. “ It is not at all likely that he was your uncle, Miss Owen. In fact, I feel sure he was nothing at all to you. But here is the box — you may examine the contents and draw your own conclusions.”

He placed the box in her hands outstretched to receive it, hesitated, looking gravely down into her wide, anxious eyes, turned on his heel and retreated to the back of the room, leaving Brother Van to find a bench for Arlea to sit on.

“ A black sheep — painted black by his own father and sister! ” Gaylord muttered cynically to himself. “ The hand of some dear relative usually does wield the brush when young sheep are painted black. A group of reckless boys trying to be men — a bottle — a game of cards! Heinous crimes, to

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be sure — in the eyes of a narrow-minded preacher's family that lives always with a pot of black paint and the brush of bitter denunciation ready to hand. Paint of that kind seldom wears off. My God, how it does stick to a man! ”

A sharp exclamation from the girl brought him quickly repentant to her side in three long steps. Brother Van, standing just behind her, was leaning forward and staring intently over her shoulder at two small, faded photographs which she was holding at arm's length before her. Gaylord saw that her face was very white and her eyes filled with horror.

“It's mother! It's exactly like the picture she had in her album — the one she gave to me. I have it in my trunk in the wagon! And this is Uncle Albert when he was a little boy. It's exactly like the picture that was covered up with another one in the album. Mother showed it to me before she died. Oh, Brother Van, run quick and tell Lubelle to get my photograph album out of my trunk and bring it over here! It's Uncle Albert, and he's dead! Killed — murdered — and to think of the bitter thoughts I've had for him! ”

“God bless me! ” Brother Van's tone was not altogether pious, and he hurried off to find Lubelle and the album.

Gaylord stood looking down at the girl, his eyes

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blue and sparkling, cold as a lake lashed by a winter storm.

"That picture in itself does not constitute proof that the man was your uncle," he said tersely. "Miss Owen, you should be careful not to jump at conclusions. Aren't you just a bit eager to find him dead and out of the way?"

"Oh, but it's awful to think he was killed — murdered! My mother's brother! She loved him when he was little and sweet and innocent. I'm — sorry!" Arlea began to cry.

"But not so sorry as you would have been to see him standing before you, claiming you as his niece!" Gaylord's voice was harsh with the bitterness that held him. "He was a black sheep, remember. A disgrace to his family."

He turned away and began putting the store in order, fumbling familiar objects, his mind a turmoil of resentment. There was nothing that he could say to help the girl, he told himself bitterly. It was her problem, not his. Let her solve it as she had been taught to do — with the prim, intolerant judgment of the self-righteous.

Arlea was trying her best to do that very thing. She wiped her eyes, laid the two pictures down in her lap and returned to her investigation of the contents of the box. After all, she had never known her uncle, and she was too downright honest to pre-

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tend a grief she could not feel in her heart. Gaylord glanced at her over his shoulder and saw her holding the roll of money in one hand and the watch in another while she stared into space; thinking of her uncle's riotous past, he supposed, and how God had mercifully removed him. With a shrug, he turned back to his work. No, there was nothing he could say to the girl; nothing more that he could do to help her. He had done the only thing possible — the best thing for her.

Milt Frisbee came in, followed closely by Brother Van and Lubelle with the album. It was evident that Milt had heard from the little preacher the dramatic outcome of Arlea's search, for he went straight up to her and patted her on the shoulder as an older brother might have done.

"It's a darned shame," he said bluffly, "if things have got to turn out this way. But that's the way it happens in this world, nine times out of ten. I hear you found a picture of your mother amongst his things. First I knew there was any pictures of anybody found on Rat-eye, but things was kinda exciting that day, and maybe I never noticed." Milt was struck with a sudden, appalling idea just then, and turned to Gaylord pantomiming the urgent need of private speech. Gaylord led him morosely out the back door, his temper obstinately braced to an inflexible purpose.

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"Say!" Milt exclaimed in a horrified whisper, though they were well out of hearing. "You don't suppose that darn skunk of a Rat-eye Williams was her *uncle*, do you? They say the uncle was a mean, ornery cuss, about like Rat-eye — and the man Rat-eye killed looked like a kinda nice fellow. What do you think, Burt? 'Course, when they took the stuff Rat-eye stole, they cleaned his pockets out — and I'm damned if it don't look to me like them pictures must have been some Rat-eye was packin' around. Even a skunk has had parents, you know, and some of the worst characters in the country are the techiest about their folks. It's Rat-eye, I'd stake my life on that! But I guess we better not say anything about that, huh?"

Gaylord's voice was cold when he answered, but not colder than the gleam in his eyes that had taken on the color of new steel.

"I don't suppose it's necessary to point out the possibility that her uncle might have been the murderer instead of the victim," he assented contemptuously. "She'd very likely believe it!"

"Well, it's a damn shame, any way you look at it. If you're willin', Burt, we'll just lay low and say nothin' about Rat-eye. Let her think her uncle was the minin' man Rat-eye killed and robbed. Say, that would give her that roll of money the man had on him! Better than two thousand dollars, all told.

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What do you say, Burt? The little girl looks like she needed money, and that preacher ain't goin' to be able to help her out except with prayin'. And prayers," he added sententiously, "don't pay no stage fare—I don't give a damn how righteous they are!"

"She's welcome to the money, far's I'm concerned," Gaylord coldly consented. "And I emphatically approve the idea of giving the girl a memory she can at least hold without a shudder. She is only what her environment and teaching have made her. Let her Uncle Albert's tragic death gloss over his sins in her eyes. It's best, all around. No one will ever claim that money—let her have it, Milt. And will you tend the store to-day? I've an errand across the valley. I—er—I have to go over to Wheeler's ranch. Don't know when I'll be back." He walked swiftly away toward Kentucky Joe's corral, as if his errand was exceedingly urgent.

Milt looked after him, shook his head in complete mystification and went back to Arlea.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HUNTERS ABROAD

A LITTLE wind crept up the slope where the Indian village had stood, and whistled at the black desolation of the place. It stirred the great circle of ashes where had stood the lodge of Sho-kup, and fingered the charred bones and the bits of iron and the obsidian arrowheads that had failed to win through the flame-guarded gateway of the spirit trail Chief Sho-kup had taken. Spatular frontal bones of horses were there — fleet ponies they had been and dear to old Sho-kup's heart. Bits of burnt blankets still holding some semblance of their weave, treasured iron pots and buckets, beads, silver bracelets, strings of elk teeth and the claws of a grizzly bear. Smoking still were the bags of grain thrown recklessly upon the funeral pyre — and just within the circle the grinning skull of Wa-hi, the Fox.

What lodges had not been destroyed in the sacrificial frenzy of the burning had been carried on the backs of the squaws to a glade five miles and more down the river; stealthily, lest those bad spirits that had taken their chief should follow and further harass the tribe. Circles of stones that had held down

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the lower edge of the hides remained now to mark where the tepees had stood; would remain for many a year in mute protest against the desertion.

The wind made merry there for a while, dancing in the ashes and throwing high into the air the cinereous relics of the dead, then whirling away to other burned lodges. Then it, too, stole away down the valley to meet its brother winds that were coming, and left the knoll breathless, abandoned, a spot forever taboo among all Indians because of the spirits that had worked their will upon a chief in that spot and would ever hold it under stern interdiction against trespassers. For such is the law of the red man's gods.

In the new village down the river, Que-ta-pat-so let fall his ragged gray blanket (his best ones having been added to the great burning that Sho-kup, his father, might ride proudly to the Happy Hunting Ground, rich with many blankets packed upon his ponies) and sniffed the morning air that was too warm by far for the second moon after the harvest dance. Heavy it was, and sultry with an uneasy calm that seemed just ready to explode into tumult; but no heavier than was the soul of Que-ta-pat-so as he faced with gloomy brows this threat of a storm and thought of the good grain and the meat, the pine nuts and blankets and beads that had gone to the burning.

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In spring so great a funeral would have been bad for the tribe that still must go on eating day by day when the time of mourning was past. In the edge of winter, after the Indian agent and the Overland Stage Company had paid tribute to their desire for peace, the orgy of giving to the dead was likely to cost the tribe dear. Already the wise old squaws were beginning to murmur together over their grinding stones, and to pad away up the forested slopes after the pine nuts that still remained to be gathered. Farther afield they must go now, since all the nearer groves had been visited during the lazy warm days when the children shouted and laughed and played games among the trees.

To-day there would be no games. The squaws stole away in silence, carrying their oldest, worn-out baskets that had not been good enough to burn for a chief. The youngsters were likewise burdened with makeshift receptacles, the older girls carrying the swaddled papooses in little hooded baskets on their backs as a kindness to the mothers who had burdens in plenty.

Que-ta-pat-so watched them go trooping off among the trees. Then, when the last lagging child had disappeared he gazed again upon the lowering clouds, hitched up his blanket on his shoulders and strode away to where the young men of the tribe sat in a series of circles around deerskin robes, apathet-

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ically gambling for such meager treasures as were left to them. Que-ta-pat-so stood with his arms folded within his blanket and watched them for a time, his thoughts hidden behind a face like stone.

"Why do you sit idle, and play for stakes the smallest papoose would despise?" he asked abruptly, the sting of contempt in his voice. "Do the young men fear to follow the antelope? Do the old men forget that their bellies will grow empty and ache for food when the great snows come? It has been told to me by the spirit of my father, Sho-kup, that now the time of mourning has passed and the time of hunting has come. Already the storm gods gather their winds together. Let the young men take up their bows and arrows and go into the hills. It is your chief Sho-kup who commands you, speaking through the lips of Que-ta-pat-so, his son."

The longest bows, the straightest arrows, the best obsidian arrow points were gone, as were most of the guns. The young men swept together their meager winnings, prayed to their gods of the chase and went away into the hills. The older bucks likewise dispersed, feeling uncomfortably certain that the stern spirit of Sho-kup stared disapprovingly at them through the eyes of Que-ta-pat-so. A good many went fishing, while others followed the young men into the forest.

Que-ta-pat-so himself strode away up the valley

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to talk gravely with his friends, the white men at Whisky Flat.

To-sarke, friend of the departed Wa-hi, had succeeded in wounding an antelope and with four young fellows was following the blood trail with the tenacity of hunting dogs. The day was nearly spent and so was the quarry. Even the dogged hunters that trotted single file along the mountain slopes toward the foot of the valley were running with heaving chests and trickles of sweat down their bronzed cheeks. Twice in the last half mile they had sighted the white flag of the wounded pronghorn and had paused to send a volley of arrows after it. But the chase was far from ended; with sure instinct the animal was bouncing down a long ridge toward the Pass. Another half hour and it might dodge through into the network of gulches and craggy slopes beyond, where the fagged Shoshones must needs stop often to find the trail unless the bloodstains betrayed it—and the deep gash along its shoulder had nearly stopped bleeding, though the deeper, internal wound was slowly sapping the strength of the big buck.

Had the contour of the terrain permitted, the Indians would have deployed with instinctive strategy to confuse the prey and finally to surround it and make the kill. But the narrow hogback ex-

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tended straight to the river at the head of the Pass; no spreading out was possible there. Like a comet's tail they ran, their minds insensibly prepared for defeat as they came hurtling down to the river's brink, saw where the antelope had cleared in one tremendous leap and had gone on.

With the water surging to their armpits, weapons held high, they crossed the stream and pressed on into the Pass, the pronghorn's cloven hoofprints showing deep in the sand before them.

Then with a roar and a mighty heave against their chests came the wind from out the black clouds rolling up through the Pass, pent between the high peaks on either side. Shut in by forest on the high slopes or making their way through networks of canyons, engrossed in the chase, they had not glimpsed the approaching storm nor felt its menace in the sultry oppressiveness of the atmosphere. Now it struck them with the shock of a complete surprise; a great, supernatural onslaught of the elements they could not understand and so deified. To their primitive minds it meant that the storm god had taken the antelope for himself and was bellowing his anger at them.

To-sarke halted, and the four came pushing up against the gale and stood close behind him, irresolute, hating to yield and yet afraid to go on.

Came a flash and a terrific, splitting roar of

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thunder that buckled their knees and all but threw them to the ground. On the heels of that a staccato explosion of shots booming close. Out of the vortex leaped the pronghorn, glassy eyes fixed, head raised as he bore down upon the group, and just behind him, spewed out of the very throat of the tornado, a black demon of a horse bestrode by a man whose gun spouted fire as he came charging down upon them.

To-sarke whirled, mowing down two hunters in his frantic haste to be gone from that accursed spot. The fallen forgot to retrieve the bows jarred out of their hands, but went scrambling on hands and knees until they could regain their feet. Hunger and weariness blotted from their minds, they fled up the river, shod with stark terror. Behind them the storm god lashed the clouds with whips of flame, and the clouds roared and roared again. Branches of trees were falling in the grove. The gale buffeted them, threw them together, sent them reeling up the valley. So they staggered into the new village and crept gasping into the lodge of To-sarke, where they huddled afraid, spent bodies drawn up and shivering as the tempest shook the thin walls of their shelter.

Que-ta-pat-so, reading new disaster into their headlong haste to hide, sought them out in defiance of his dignity. To him To-sarke spoke, and his

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words were repeated in awestruck undertones until the whole tribe down to the wide-eyed papooses could tell the tale in this wise:

“To-sarke the brave one followed the antelope into the mouth of the valley. And the storm god, seeing the fat deer, was angry and sent a great whirlwind and with whips of fire drove the clouds through the mouth of the valley. And out of the pillar of cloud rode the Black Thunder. And the Black Thunder drove the hunters back to the village and took the antelope for himself.”

CHAPTER NINE

NOTHING TO DO BUT RIDE

BACK in the trail where the Indians had their first horrified glimpse of the demon, Laughing Lew Wheeler swung down from his horse beside the limp body of the antelope, drew his heavy hunting knife and with swift slashes cut the animal into quarters that could be tied behind the high-cantled stock saddles. Behind him came two other riders, and these Lew hailed. When they halted beside him he loaded on the meat, tying it securely. Then, leaving the head and entrails where the animal had fallen, they rode on to where the valley widened. Here they waited to turn the herd of cattle that came galloping awkwardly out of the Pass with heads lowered and eyes staring wildly, scared, ready to stampede but lacking the energy after a long day's drive.

"How about it, Baldy? Don't you think we'd better make camp?" Laughing Lew waved a hand toward the big white pine on the slope.

"Camp? Not on your life! Not when it's only ten miles or so to Whisky Flat. Dang it, Lew, I've been promisin' my belly all the hot grub and whisky

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it could hold to-night. Whisky Flat — say, ain't that the sweetest name you ever heard?"

"Sweet? Say, Baldy, if they'd change the name of heaven and call it Whisky Flat, I'd join the church and be a preacher!" Lem Davis pulled up his coat collar and leaned sidewise to let the water drain off his wide hat-brim before he turned to his young boss. "Pine trees is awful to draw lightnin', don't you know it, Lew?"

Laughing Lew threw back his head and showed why his friends called him that. Twenty-four, and half of the years lived in the open, Lew had yet to face the circumstance that would rob life of its zest or take the laughter out of his eyes and his throat. He laughed now at his bedraggled companions and at the storm that was piling misery upon discomfort; at their frank eagerness for shelter and food and drink.

"This lightning doesn't need a pine tree for a target," he shouted above the uproar of the storm. "It can sizzle your hide anywhere. On the trail to Whisky Flat, for instance. I can stand it as long as the rest of you can, but I thought maybe you could smell fried antelope liver. I sure can."

"Me, I can smell brimstone!" Lem Davis yelled as he swung to turn a recalcitrant cow back into the herd. "Hell ain't fur off, now I'm tellin' yuh!"

As the terrified cattle streamed out of the Pass

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followed close by three other whooping cowboys, the point riders separated to hold the lumbering herd to the trail. The wind and rain drove them forward, rather than the shouting of the men. Since they would drift before the storm regardless of any man's desire, as well let them drift on to Whisky Flat, thought Lew, and headed the stragglers back into the road.

Came a terrific, ear-splitting crash and a thunderous roar that shook the very earth beneath them. Lew's horse reared and gave a great leap ahead, fell to his knees, sprang upward like a bounced ball and bolted up the trail like the demon To-sarke thought him. Lew rose in the stirrups, threw all his weight upon the reins and felt one break. The sudden release almost unseated him, and there was no stopping the horse after that. The blinding glare revealed for a moment the scattering herd and frenzied horses running wild, then blackness shut down like a lid upon the valley and Lew rode blindly, madly, laughing at the chaos the tempest had wrought.

On the hill where Brother Van had labored so patiently with the balking mule the horse slowed perforce on the steep climb and Lew dismounted — stiffly, because of the long hours spent in the saddle — felt for the broken rein and made a makeshift repair, going by the sense of feeling and the occasional brief illumination of the lightning. That last thun-

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derbolt seemed to have exhausted the heavy voltage of the electrically-charged air, though the clouds showed fiery rifts and muttered sullenly among themselves while they spilled the rain in solid sheets of water which the wind blew slantwise.

"Nothing to do now but ride," Lew grinned to himself as he thrust his foot into the stirrup and mounted once more. "I couldn't find that pine tree now if I wanted to. The boys will be coming along soon as they get themselves together, and they'll head for Whisky Flat — no doubt about that."

Soaked to the skin he was, muscle-weary and famished with nothing but a pork sandwich since early morning. Visions of succulent antelope steaks watered his mouth as he rode; yet he went chuckling to himself over his runaway and the plight of those other riders who had no doubt made frantic attempts to hold the herd when it scattered like a covey of frightened quail.

What a terrifying crash that had been! Now that he thought of it, it sounded as if the earth had been split asunder to its very middle. That tremor, too, had been almost like an earthquake. Laughing Lew wondered a little as he rode bent before the storm; pondered in the intervals of his craving for food, what direful catastrophe had come to those hills tortured already by the wind and the rain. No common thunderbolt was that — or at any rate the

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effect was out of all proportion. A landslide would have shaken the earth in just that way, would have sounded as if the skies were falling.

Lew wriggled his shoulders inside his sopping coat as a stream of cold water trickled down his spinal column, and his thoughts returned to food. Only for the torrential downpour he would have stopped right there, built a fire and broiled himself a juicy antelope steak off the hind quarter tied to his saddle. That brief ecstasy being out of the question, he pressed his spurs against the dripping flanks of his horse.

"You wanted to run so damn bad," he taunted, "now go it!"

Probably the horse was as hungry as his master; certainly he made no complaint against speed, for he sprang into a gallop and went splashing through the pools of water that stood in every hollow and rut, sending up miniature geysers as he passed. So he came at length to the public corral and low sheds which was Whisky Flat's best substitute for a livery stable. There Laughing Lew left the horse in charge of the hostler and himself strode through the rain to where Kentucky Joe's hotel bulked beside the road, fitfully revealed in the diminishing glares of sheet lightning.

CHAPTER TEN

A MOST AMAZING RESEMBLANCE

STEAMING luxuriously before the fireplace in the barroom, Laughing Lew gulped down a mug of hot toddy which Kentucky Joe had obligingly brewed for him (adding an extra dose of whisky every time he glanced toward the drenched figure). Laughing Lew would much have preferred food, but supper was not ready and his big, young body cried out for stimulant of some sort. He had never tasted the evanescent joys of drunken carousal, but a hot toddy sounded harmless enough when Kentucky Joe suggested it, and it certainly did hit the spot!

A wonderful feeling of warmth passed through his body and limbs in a series of delicious, crimply waves. The dingy barroom was glorified into a palace, Kentucky Joe became a benevolent demigod whose chief mission in life was to weave spells of enchantment for the delight of his guests. A log in the fireplace sent up a last tongue of flame and broke into a glowing heap of coals, startling Laughing Lew with a sudden delectable vision. He turned, waving the empty mug at Kentucky Joe.

"Send some one down to the feed yard and get the quarter of antelope I brought in," he amiably

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commanded, with the unconscious tone of authority that marks a man used to giving orders. "Say it's the meat Lew Wheeler brought in. This fire is just right now for broiling antelope steak — and Lord, but I'm hungry!"

"We got roast pork for supper," Joe announced with an asthmatic gasp. "But I'll send somebody for the antelope. Lew Wheeler, eh? Your dad's been lookin' for you every day for the last two weeks. Bringin' in cattle, eh? Had fine warm weather, all fall — and yuh had to choose the worst storm this year to git home in!"

With a laugh and a wheeze Joe turned back to the bar with the double purpose of sending a man for the haunch of antelope, and of mixing another drink for his rain-soaked guest, who had suddenly assumed a halo of importance in Joe's eyes. Lew Wheeler was the son of Captain Wheeler and Captain Wheeler was an old army scout turned cattleman. Joe was shrewd. A "cow outfit" in the valley meant increased business for him. Wherefore Captain Wheeler's son could have anything he wanted.

Laughing Lew stared doubtfully at the second steaming mug placed in his hands; but the crimply waves of warmth did not encourage cold judgment. He emptied the second mug and straightway he himself became like unto a god, impervious to human frailties or discomfort. The flames in the fireplace

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leaped at him, played with him, taunted him. The red grinning face of Kentucky Joe swelled enormously, then abruptly separated into two red grinning faces.

Secretly amazed at the transformation, Laughing Lew nevertheless held fast to the training civilization and a State University had given him. He did not betray his awareness of the miraculous change in Kentucky Joe, but punctiliously addressed each grinning face in turn and was careful to slight neither.

The antelope haunch was brought and laid upon the bar, where Kentucky Joe wiped off the rain with a clean towel before he obligingly cut a steak from the juiciest part of the rump, using Lew's hunting knife for the purpose. Joe still believed that roast pork ought to satisfy any man, but Laughing Lew Wheeler had expressed an earnest desire for antelope steak broiled over the coals according to his own notion, and his whim was Joe's law.

So presently Laughing Lew was seated securely on a box before the fire, broiling a steak to his liking while an oblong pewter plate sat warming on the hearth.

One small circumstance arrested the wavering attention of the young man. He had ordered one steak cut for his supper, and Kentucky Joe had apparently brought two instead; yet when he turned

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the meat on the grate there was but one. Laughing Lew was puzzled, but he was not particularly worried. He felt as if he could eat two antelope steaks with no trouble at all — if there really were two.

“Supper’s on the table, now,” Joe wheezed when he saw young Wheeler transfer the meat to the warm platter. “May as well take it on into the dining room, where you can have all the fixin’s.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” Lew responded, bowing dizzily. “That is a kind thought and I will act upon it.”

The few other men in the room trooped out eagerly, casting hungry, sidelong glances at the savory steak which Laughing Lew was bewilderedly jabbing with the long-handled fork Joe had brought him. Funny he couldn’t separate those two steaks! Then a happy thought struck him. He would know for certain after he had eaten one. If a steak remained on the plate he would know beyond all doubt that there had been two; if he ate one and left the platter clean then there had all along been only one, and the mistake would be his.

With watering mouth he picked up the dish and started for the door through which the last man had disappeared. The fact that two doors confronted him gave him momentary pause, but since both were open he walked through the nearest one, crossing the uncarpeted hall where the wind bellowed

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in through a broken windowpane, and entered the room opposite. Here he halted abruptly, transfixed by the sight of two young women who rose together from a red sofa and stared at him with wide-open blue eyes.

"Er — good evening, ladies," said Laughing Lew, and made his best bow over the tilted platter, dripping gravy on his boot.

"Look out, you're spilling it!" Instinctively Arlea took a step forward with some half-formed idea of saving the meat. "Is that for me?"

Under the impression that he was straightening the platter, Laughing Lew tilted it perilously the other way while he gave the girl an exalted smile.

"Certainly — for you. Both of you," he suavely assured her. "The butler is bringing the silver. Please be seated, ladies. Antelope steak should be eaten piping hot. Which table shall I draw up beside you?"

Arlea sat down, chiefly because her knees gave way beneath her.

"Most amazing resemblance — ever saw in my life!" Laughing Lew stood staring giddily down at her while he vaguely waved the platter. "Twins, I take it. You," he stated solemnly, making a jabbing gesture with the plate toward Arlea's left shoulder, "you are most beautiful — but — haughty; too cold, too super — too supercilious. Should be more

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—more like — like your siss'er. Siss'er's beautiful — and looks kinder. Ought to laugh more — Please laugh! Smile! Go on — it's easy to laugh — always laugh, myself. Boys call me Laughin' Lew — fact! ”

He stood uncertainly regarding the girl whose eyes held only horror and disgust — a reaction to his presence which young Lew Wheeler had never before experienced. Eyes were wont to smile when they met his own.

“ You miss best of life — if you can't laugh,” he urged, forgetting for the moment even his hunger. “ Those lovely lips mus' learn the sweet curves of mirth; sweet curves of joy, too. Pity such beauty's all wasted; cold, meaningless as wax doll without laughter. Please laugh — *both* of you! ”

“ You're drunk! ” Penned in the corner of the high-armed sofa, Arlea glared up at him. “ A drunken lout! Stand back and let me pass! ”

“ Ladies, ladies, such conduc' is — is distressin'ly — rude! I am not drunk. Never was drunk in my life. Shocking charge — comin' from lovely young lips. Drunken — lout! I'm su'prised — truly I am su'prised! ” He leaned forward, studying her face with grave disapproval.

“ You *are* drunk! You — you ought to be shot! ”

“ Ah — honkatonk talk! ” Sudden, hurt disillusionment gleamed in his eyes. “ Hard — bitter —

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too bad! Excuse me, ladies, I — I was for a moment deceived by your — your seeming innocence and — and beauty. Poor things — poor soiled doves — no wonder your eyes are cold. No wonder you can't laugh! ”

“ How dare you? Oh, you — you beast! You loathsome cur! ” Arlea's two fists were raised with the impulse to strike him in futile rage.

“ Excuse me, ladies, if I decline to bandy words with such as you. Regret deeply — I have mistaken both the room and the company! ”

The mockingly formal bow he gave her spilled gravy in her lap before he turned and left the room, walking with that stiff precision which marks a man who is consciously maintaining his balance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“AWFUL NICE GIRL, BUT UPPITY ”

IN the hall he collided violently with Brother Van, narrowly saving the antelope steak from disaster though he spilled more gravy. With difficulty he recovered himself and his platter and would have passed the obstacle by with a wide and eccentric half circle, had not Brother Van laid a greasy, detaining hand on his arm.

“What’s this? My boy, I fear you are intoxicated! The Lord bless you and keep you from further temptation!”

“Don’t preach to me!” Laughing Lew laid the print of his palm on Brother Van’s clerical chest. “Two brazen jades in there — jus’ insulted me! They need savin’ — I don’t. Go preach to — honk-atonk girls. Called me lo’some cur! Call’ me drunken lout. Brazen jades need preachin’ to. Go on!”

Half turning, he propelled Brother Van with a wholly unintentional violence through the open parlor door, and himself aimed carefully for the door opposite; made the entry safely, walked carefully to the bar and sat down the platter. A confused impression that he had been affronted, that injustice

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and insults had been heaped upon him rankled in his muddled mind like a bitter taste in the mouth. With his hunting knife he slashed through the steak that had caused him such disagreeable perplexity, and chewed a mouthful without relish, and spat it out on the floor when he could not swallow it.

“Brazen jade!” He muttered the words over and over, and glared at the cold, flabby meat that had been so tempting. “Cold as her eyes! She looked at the steak — at both steaks — and froze it — froze them both.

“ ‘—She had neither savour nor salt,
But a col’ an’ clear-cut fashe . . .
Perfec’ly beautiful; let be granted her, where is the
fault?
. . . Faultily faul’less, ishily reg’lar, splendi’ly
n—null,
Dead perfeshion, no more; . . .
Cold and clear-cut fashe, why come you sho cruelly
meek?
. . . Pale with the gol’en beam of an eyelash
dead on the sheek,
Passionlesh, pale, col’ fashe ——’ ”

“Aw, dry up! Quit flourishin’ that fork and spoutin’ poetry. If I didn’t know yuh, Lew, I’d swear you’re drunk!” Lem Davis, wet as if he had been swimming a river with all his clothes on, stood goggling in amaze.

Laughing Lew’s eyes wavered, stared bewilderedly. The cowboys were trooping in to stand dripping be-

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fore the fireplace rubbing chilled hands together, shaking water from soggy hat brims and making squashy sounds when they moved their feet. One or two turned backs to the blaze and presently began to steam. A nauseating odor of warm, wet wool and buckskin permeated a widening zone about the group.

It was like waking from a doze in which brief dreams had come to trouble him. His sobering brain registered a clear memory of standing before the fire, drinking something hot and invigorating. After that — had he dreamed of seeing the girl with the beautiful face and the disdainful eyes, the girl who had repulsed him so bitterly. Vividly she had confronted him — that brazen jade who had almost struck him with her fists. He glanced down at the platter of cold venison steak. That also was a part of his dream. He had dreamed of offering meat to a girl — he had forgotten his impression of two. Yet here he was in the saloon, leaning against the end of the bar, the venison steak before him. The meat was real, but he must have dreamed about the girl; a brazen jade, he seemed to have called her. Well, the name fitted her like a glove!

Lew Wheeler threw back his head, and his laughter rang loud and clear and penetrated even to the dining room, where it caught and held the attention of the diners so that loaded knives poised between

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plates and mouths that stretched in sympathetic grins. Two men who had nearly finished eating rose and straddled over their benches and hurried to see what was the joke. They saw five men who looked like drowned pups — or so one said — and they thought these were the object of Lew Wheeler's unrestrained mirth; whereupon they joined in the laughter, vaguely as men do who instinctively hide their stupidity in missing the point of a joke.

Kentucky Joe came bustling in, wheezing with the extra effort of hurrying.

“Terrible night to be out,” he gasped, grinning a welcome that was altogether sincere. “I'll mix you boys a hot drink, and then you better go right in and eat while the supper's warm. Take off your coats and hang 'em before the fire. Hiram, you go git blankets to wrap around their shoulders. Dinin' room's purty cold. Wind blowed down part of the chimbly an' the fireplace smokes. Blankets'll keep yuh warm, though. Like bugs in a rug — that's what you'll be in three shakes of a dead lamb's tail.”

While he talked he was excitedly mixing his famous hot toddy, sovereign remedy for cold, hunger and low spirits — as Laughing Lew could have testified. The shivering group extended eager hands for the big china mugs, and gulped down the steaming decoction with huge swallows followed by audible sighs denoting bliss beyond words. After that

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they draped themselves in gay blankets and strode with squashy boots down the hall to the dining room, laughing vociferously as they went.

Laughing Lew headed the procession, a red-and-green striped blanket folded about his broad shoulders, his platter of venison held rigidly before him. The first inundating wave of intoxication had passed. He was no longer dizzy, and he no longer saw double — but he still felt pleasantly exhilarated. It was good to be alive, good to be warm once more and under a friendly roof, good to be marching down upon a hot supper with a gay blanket warm upon his shoulders, and with those other blanketed figures treading close upon his heels. Half-way down the hall he sensed their likeness to Indians and sent a mischievous glance over his shoulder.

“Give ’em the buffalo dance, boys, and I’ll beat time for you. We look like buck Injuns at a pow-wow. A dance’ll warm us up. Line up there, boys. Twice around the room, and stamp the water out of your boots — and give the real old war whoop!”

With a tilt and a sweep of the big fork he pushed the venison off the platter and onto the floor, gave a blood-curdling whoop that had a cowboy yip at the end of it, leaped high into the air and came down stooping and stamping and beating time on the platter with the big iron fork. Behind him five blanketed fiends leaped high, gave a whoop and a

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yip and went surging into the dining room; single file and leaping high, stooping and peering to right and left under palms lifted to foreheads.

The half dozen men seated at the long table in the center of the room jumped, saw what was coming and chortled with amusement. Kentucky Joe, following the procession, laughed until his breath came in faint whistles from his outraged lungs.

“Buffalo! Buffalo dance!” A man who had lived among the plains Indians long enough to know their ways shouted gleefully. “Shore never larnt that there dance on the desert! That’s bunch-grass dancin’, shore’s you’re born! *Yee-ee! Buffalo!*” The old plainsman gave another whoop and joined the leaping, peering, stamping line.

The drumming of rain against walls and roof, the swash of blown gusts against the windows, the bellow of the wind in the chimney were all forgotten, drowned in the uproar within.

Halfway around the big room they went, and were abruptly halted when their leader suddenly stopped. The line stood marking time, dancing and leaping, peering over this shoulder and that shoulder while Laughing Lew stared down at the little table half screened from view in the alcove cut under the stairs in the hallway. There sat Arlea, glaring at him with a hostile kind of fear in her wide eyes, as if he were something wild that had broken in

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through a window. The drumming of the fork against the pewter slowed, stopped altogether while these two stared at each other.

So it was not a dream, after all. The girl was real enough, even though there was but one of her; real enough and cold enough to send a chill through the hot veins of Laughing Lew. Or was it a chill? Was it not rather a hot, tingly wave of resentment? Draped in the red-and-green blanket, the platter poised high in his left hand, for a full minute young Lew Wheeler stared into her wide blue eyes. Then he laughed, gave her a salute in sheer mockery, thumped his makeshift tom-tom and went prancing on down the room, tossing his head, giving her a tantalizing glance over his shoulder as he went.

He saw her lean and speak to the fat little preacher and rise from the table, her chin held high. He saw her sweep across the room to the door, the rustle of her full skirts distinctly audible in the abrupt silence that fell upon the room when she stepped out of the alcove into full view. Until then the frolicsome group had not suspected that a young woman was present to witness their foolery. Silence attended the last hurried gulp which terminated Brother Van's enjoyment of his coffee as he, too, rose and trotted after her, belatedly endeavoring to fulfill his duty as an escort.

All their laughter, all their zest for the spectacular

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performance evaporated before one young woman's withering contempt. Sheepishly they slunk into their places at the long table and picked up the steel knives and forks like children smarting under a wholly unexpected rebuke. Not a yip was left in their throats, not a prancy leap in their agile legs. Embarrassed, hot with confusion, they sat huddled in their blankets — five tired young cowboys with wet feet and empty stomachs, sitting in a row with the breath streaming white from their nostrils as they bent heads over their plates.

Laughing Lew still snorted defiance, still carried his shoulders swaggeringly, still laughed at the horrified look on the face of the girl who had called him a loathsome cur — just why, he had yet to understand.

“Brazen jade!” he repeated under his breath because he had been taught to leave women out of his talk in public places; an old-fashioned precept sternly established in his mind.

“That poor young lady is a lone orphan,” Kentucky Joe informed them, his hard breathing forming a cloud of white steam around his bald head so that his red face was seen through a thin haze on which the nearest candle glowed dimly. “Lost her father an’ mother up in Palisade,” he added garrulously, “and come on down here with the preacher — lookin’ fer her uncle. Uncle’s dead. There’s

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some talk goin' around — that Rat-eye Williams was her uncle. Either him, or that minin' man Rat-eye killed. She thinks it's the minin' man. Folks is lettin' her think so. Name's Miss Arlea Owen. Goin' to pull out an' go back East quick as the weather settles agin. Awful nice girl, but uppity. Turrible uppity. Think's we're all savages. That's why she up and left the room. Guess mebbly she thought you boys was goin' t' skelp her."

Lem Davis grinned, gave his fellows a sidelong glance and pointed his fork at Laughing Lew.

"One more pickle you get us boys into, and you're done," he cried in pretended anger, and shook the fork like an accusing finger. "Now you've went and got us all misjudged again! I coulda convinced her I'm a nice young man and part civilized — and here you went and made me out a border ruffian. Made a damn fool of myself in front of her! Take me a week uh bitter weepin' to wipe out the memory."

"Yeah — and what about me?" Baldy, whose legal name was John Balderson, glanced up glumly.

Laughing Lew gave them a straight look, and for once there was no mirth in his eyes.

"Careful you don't make damn fools of yourselves in a different way," he said evenly. "Pass the bread, will you, Lem?"

The muscles in Lem's face stiffened. Without

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a word he passed the bread, gave Baldy a warning kick under the table and fell to work at the pleasant duty of replenishing his strength with food; laboring valiantly to fill his stomach as full as possible as quickly as he could without choking, the others striving to outdo him in speed.

Kentucky Joe's prominent, light-blue eyes sent frequent furtive glances to the impassive face of young Lew Wheeler. Afterward he confided to the widow Jensen that young Wheeler was the spit 'n' image of the captain, and that the whole crowd of cowboys jumped when Lew Wheeler snapped his fingers. Which was one crude way of expressing a truth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“HE IS CALLED LAUGHING LEW”

ALL that evening it rained, and the W Bar boys — which was Captain Wheeler’s brand — dried themselves out; laughed, sang and made merry in Kentucky Joe’s barroom. The noise of their revelry penetrated to the very garret of the big, gloomy hotel and sent little shivers along the nerves of Arlea Owen, compelled to listen to the uproar whether she would or no.

Because she had been driven from the dining room by those wild ruffians in blankets and soppy, broad-brimmed hats, she felt cross as a child who has been sent to bed without its supper. Her room was cold with the depressing chill of damp walls and a falling temperature outside. The rain beat against her window like importuning fingers drumming for attention. The warped sash rattled in the gale that blew fitfully in gusts. During the infrequent lulls in the storm the rude laughter of men surged boisterously up the stairs. At such times Arlea would shudder — unconsciously dramatizing her emotions with a bit of exaggeration — and hold her palms over her ears, trying to shut out the hateful sounds.

Beside the marble-topped table where the candle

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waved a puny flame as if it were daring the shadows to leave their lurking places in the corners of the room, Lubelle Wan-washe sat cross-legged on the floor, thick black braids of hair hanging quiet over her breasts, and crooned hymns from the book Brother Van had given her in payment of his wager. Plaintive ones she chose; hymns written in a minor key, preferably those hymns devoted to death and the grave.

“How sweet the scene when Christians die!
How softly falls th’ expiring breath ——”

Her rich, Indian voice rose smoothly on the wailing high notes, indescribably mournful with the melancholy of her race and the quaint precision with which she pronounced each word. Though it is extremely doubtful if she knew the meaning of the longer ones, her power of mimicry was sufficient to give the lines that pious fervor which Brother Van had taught her.

“ So gently droops the closing eye ——”

“ Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lubelle! ” Arlea leaned exasperatedly and snatched the book from the young squaw’s smooth, brown hands. “ If you must sing, why don’t you choose something at least decently cheerful? That’s a funeral song! ”

“ It is a song which Brother Van loves to sing,” Lubelle stated, as if that answered all arguments,

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erased all objections. "He said it is his song of going home. You are not happy because you want to go home. I sing the going-home song. That is how the Shoshones do. When we are sad we sing songs of sadness. When we are glad we dance and sing the songs of joy. So all may know what is in our hearts. Now I know what is in your heart, and I sing the song for that."

"Oh. You do? Well, you're wrong. If you wanted to sing to fit my feelings, Lubelle, you'd sing a song of hate."

"The song of war?" Lubelle's great, black eyes almost twinkled. "But to sing the war song you must dance. Will you dance the war dance while I sing? It is good when the heart is full of hate. But we must not tell Brother Van that we are full of hate and war. That is not Christian."

Arlea did not argue the point. Instead she shivered and drew her heavy, woolen shawl closer about her shoulders, wrinkled her nose because it was tingling with cold, and looked altogether miserable, with her breath congealed to a white steam.

"All that terrible thunder and lightning this evening, and now it's like the North Pole! I never saw such a country! How can it rain when it's so cold?"

"It is freeze rain," Lubelle told her without emotion. "I forget the word."

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“Sleet?”

“It is sleet. My people down in the village will be cold to-night. They have no warm blanket, their tepees are not warm. I think they have not food enough. It is bad. It is for them also I sing the song of sadness.”

“You’ll have to do your singing in your own room, then. And I want you here. I’m afraid of all those horrible drinking men downstairs. It’s awful to stay right in the house where there’s a saloon. To-morrow I’m going to leave, if I have to go in a storm. I simply can’t stand it here another day! Lubelle, I wish you’d go and find out the name of that tall man — he’s the worst one of the lot — who was beating the platter and leading that awful dance. Ask Joe who he is and — and all about him. But don’t let them suspect that I sent you.”

“He is the son of the Captain who is the friend of the man who keeps the store,” Lubelle informed her calmly, without stirring so much as a finger. “He is the young man who brought meat to you on that plate. He is called Laughing Lew. It is a good name, I think. Not all men laugh enough. He is very handsome.”

“He’s perfectly detestable! Never dare to mention that beast to me again! Is he going to stay in the valley?”

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Lubelle slanted a sly look upward. One hand went up slowly to regain the much-prized hymn book, which Arlea had tossed upon the table.

"I will find out. Then I will tell you."

"I don't want to know anything about him. I merely asked because there's nothing else to talk about." Arlea shivered again, laid her fingers daintily upon the cold tip of her straight little nose, and listened to the drumming of the storm against the window. It was sleet — well she knew that sound! It foretold bitter frost and snow in great drifted ridges. Winter was tingling the air in that room. Arlea shuddered.

"Are you sure Mr. Gaylord has not come home?" she asked after a silence. "He would soon put a stop to that carousing downstairs. Lubelle, I'm freezing! I can't go to bed so early, and I can't sit here and freeze. Do something, why don't you? Can't you bring up a kettle of hot coals to take the chill out of this room?"

"The fire burns bright in the parlor," said Lubelle, and slipped the hymn book under her red-dotted apron. "The flame leaps high up the chimney. The logs snap to show they are happy. The big red chair stands close to the hearth." She paused, artfully waiting to let the picture stamp itself indelibly on the girl's imagination. "But I will bring you hot coals in a kettle. You can spread

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your fingers over the heat and dream of the fire in the parlor. Perhaps the dream will warm you.”

Arlea frowned.

“I can’t go down there among those drunken vagabonds,” she said pettishly. “You know I can’t. I’d rather take my chance of freezing than go down where they are.”

“They are not in the parlor,” Lubelle observed, and got up from the floor. “The door of the bar-room is shut tight, and the door of the parlor is also shut. Two shut doors are between those men and you when you are here. Two shut doors are between those men and the bright fire with the red chair pulled close. Two shut doors when you go to bed ——”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, hush!” Arlea stamped her foot.

“I go for the hot coals,” Lubelle added meekly. “But I spoke the truth, Arlea. It is not the men who harm you. It is your thoughts about them that make you afraid.”

“I wish you’d stop that everlasting chatter. I’m *not* afraid. I don’t care if this hotel is full of drunkards, I tell you! But I suppose I may have the privilege of disliking rowdyism, may I not?”

Lubelle, making ready to leave the room, presumably on her errand of the hot coals, did not answer. Arlea looked at the slim erect figure of the

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squaw smoothly clothed with bright figured calico; at the shining black hair with a dividing line running straight to the nape of her neck, the hair combed sleekly forward to her well-shaped ears. A striking picture she made as she stood fingering the latch of the door which Arlea in her anger had locked, but the girl was not thinking then of Lubelle's picturesque comeliness. Instead she was visioning that open fire in the parlor and yearning after its warmth.

"Well, if you're going to be that slow about it, I may as well go down. I could freeze to death waiting for you to bring coals," she said crossly, and came tap-tapping across the bare room in the high-heeled slippers she wore.

Lubelle opened the door, smiling inscrutably to herself. Too well she knew how shallow was Arlea's brief anger; like the wind blowing across a deep pool; a stormy surface with still depths beneath.

"I will bring the coals. They will make the room warm for going to bed," she observed placidly, leading the way down the straight stairs that ended near the front of the long hall. Six steps from the floor she looked back, her keen ears telling her that her mistress had paused and was now descending slowly, listening. In the barroom a robust young voice was singing:

“He Is Called Laughing Lew”

“In days of old, when knights were bold
And barons held their sway,
A warrior bold with spurs of gold
Sang merrily his lay —
Sang merrily his lay;
‘My love is young and fair,
My love has golden hair,
And eyes so blue
And heart so true
That none with her compare!’ ”

With a movement wholly unconscious Arlea lifted one hand and touched her hair. Who in that brutish crowd could be singing a song of that type? Her right foot, poised to take the last step downward, drew back and waited.

“ ‘So what care I though death be nigh?
I’ll fight for love, or die!
So what care I though death be nigh?
I’ll fight for love, I’ll fight for love —
For love, for love or die!’
So this brave knight in armor bright
Went boldly to the fray ——”

“Say, Lew, what the hell is a fray?” a bellowing voice callously interrupted. “If it’s something to drink, Joe can mix one and we’ll try it — hey, boys?”

“Yeah! Sing somethin’ cheerful, Lew, if you got to sing. That golden-hair and blue-eyes makes me so damn’ sad I wanta cry!”

The singer, who had been struggling to go on with the song and drown the ribald interruption

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with the sheer melody of his voice, broke suddenly into irrepressible laughter.

Afterward the girl called herself a self-conscious little fool, but at the time she burned with a savage resentment. That boyish, uncontrolled laughter seemed deliberately aimed at herself. It was as if they saw through the heavy, plank door, and with an uncanny prescience that she would be there listening, were deliberately aiming at her their jibes and laughter. The humiliation of it dyed face and neck a hot crimson and drove her in a panic to the parlor. Within the sanctuary she stood leaning against the closed door, listening to the cachinnations in the saloon across the hall.

What had she done, that those men should make her the object of their senseless jokes? That wretch in there had no right to sing about golden hair and eyes of blue — singling her out at the top of his voice! He'd fight for love, would he? The abominable brute!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEYOND THE PLANK DOOR

A BLAST of wind struck the building a giant's blow. It rattled every window sash and drew the flames in the fireplace leaping high up the chimney. The voices in the barroom dwindled to an indistinguishable murmur. Chilled to the marrow of her bones from sitting in her cold room upstairs, Arlea shivered and hurried across to the fire. There stood the red chair, just as Lubelle had described it; dingy, brocaded velvet, with a high back and prim upholstered arms. With a trembling eagerness she pulled it closer to the hearth and sat down, holding out her chilled fingers to the cheerful blaze.

The fire at least was friendly and familiar, the one comforting element remaining to her of that home life for which she hungered with a terrible gnawing ache that nothing seemed to ease. As the warmth subtly permeated her shivering flesh her antagonism yielded slowly to a pensive meditation, an unconscious drifting into a review of her fifteen years of remembered past.

Since the first hairy man who made a servant of fire squatted on his haunches before a handful of blazing twigs and groped in mental fog for the mean-

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ing of life, the flickering tongues of flames in an open fire have brought a hypnotic stare into the yearning eyes of men and women the world over. Youths have clasped warm hands and built castles in the coals, beside which the pleasure palace of Kublai Khan was the trivial dream of a feeble mind. Old age has folded work-stiffened fingers loosely together and in the blaze rebuilt the air castles of youth — and children have watched wide eyed the flames and have seen wonderful things there visioned; giants and fairies and valorous deeds of war.

So Arlea gazed and gazed and was at home again, and her weak, day-dreaming father was urging, arguing, coaxing her mother to venture out into the country where fortunes were made in a day. What blind impulse had driven him forth to the savage land that would snatch away his life and that of his mate? That her mother, narrow and bigoted though she was, had been the stronger of the two had been clearly comprehended by Arlea when, on her deathbed, her mother had told all she knew of Uncle Albert and, in spite of the old condemnation that still embittered her speech, had implored Arlea to seek him out and claim his protection. Had she felt a premonition that her child would soon be fatherless as well as motherless? Arlea had often wondered what prophetic instinct had

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impelled her mother to open the sealed door of her skeleton closet and show her daughter the outcast brother's hidden history. Perhaps she had good reason to know how weak would be the father's support; at any rate, her last effort to protect her daughter had been tragically useless.

What would her mother think of God now, if she knew her idolized daughter was absolutely alone in the world, facing the necessity of making her way as best she could to the commonplace little village in Massachusetts where she had been born? Wouldn't she think God was being rather unnecessarily harsh? Tears of grief and self-pity rolled down Arlea's cheeks. In all the world, she told herself, there was no other girl so utterly friendless and forlorn.

Across the hall some one began singing again, a foolish little negro love song of the period, with a haunting sweetness in the simple melody:

“Come, love, come, the boat lies low,
The moon shines bright on the old bayou ——”

Other voices, full-lunged and heedlessly happy, took hold of the refrain and tried to raise the roof with it. One blustering bass voice slipped alarmingly off key into unplumbed depths, recovered with a gasp and went on bellowing deep chest tones without regard to tune or rhythm.

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Arlea awoke to the astonishing fact that she was smiling; that she had for a moment forgotten her horror and disgust of those rough men of the wild Indian dance in the dining room, and was listening rather enviously to the fun they were having in there; just as she used to lick the frost off the kitchen window at home and with tremors of excitement watch the boys go boldly forth into terrific snowball battles. Boys always had such good times! Much better than girls.

In spite of herself she laughed, an involuntary, girlish giggle when the unruly bass stopped with a roar and a shouted,

“Git your big hoof off’n my corn patch! You stomp time like a pile-driver!”

It was the same voice that had protested that singing about golden hair and blue eyes made him so sad he wanted to cry. A good-natured, humorous voice, with nothing in it to frighten any girl. Arlea thought he must be one of those blanketed dancers; the short one perhaps, with the brown hair that curled in tight little locks all over his head. Even in her shocked abhorrence of the horseplay, she had noticed the short, curly-haired man — perhaps because he had stood just behind that unspeakable ruffian they called Laughing Lew.

The singing dwindled to the monotonous murmuring of a voice evidently recounting some ad-

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venture of the trail. Bursts of laughter punctuated the infrequent pauses, and Arlea wished futilely that she were a man so that she could walk in there boldly and see what they were laughing about; what they were doing behind that closed door. How much easier her whole life would be if she were only a boy instead of a girl! Men were never lonely or blue and discouraged, they never shrank from hardships or danger.

What was it that Mr. Gaylord had said? That any woman could whine. Did he think she had been whining just because she had honestly told him that she hated this country? He had seemed very stern and disapproving of her, but she could not see what she had done that was wrong. It was like the unmerited reproach of that drunken lout with the meat — spilling gravy all over everything and wanting her to laugh! Mr. Gaylord had stopped just short of telling her she was a whining coward, merely because she had hated the whole country and had said so. This man they called Laughing Lew had come blundering into the parlor — where he certainly had no right to be — and had called her names simply because she had told him he was drunk. Well, he was drunk; and she *did* hate Nevada. Mustn't she dare express an honest opinion, out here? Must she simper and pretend that it was a beautiful country and she

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loved to be here? And must she laugh whether she felt like it or not? Didn't they know that she was in mourning? How could she laugh?

She was on the edge of another season of self-pity, but a sudden gust of wind struck the building and almost drove in the windows with the force of the gale. When the fury had lessened a bit she leaned back once more in the red velvet chair, thrust her slippered feet toward the dying blaze, and listened again to the sounds from the bar-room. She wished some one would bring more wood, but she was afraid to leave the room and look for Lubelle. The squaw liked to sit in the kitchen by the fire; probably she was there now, singing those doleful hymns she liked so well.

In the barroom a final outbreak of laughter marked the end of the story, whatever it was. Laughing Lew was being importuned for another song and finally, rising above the mingled voices and stilling them, came his clear, careless tenor. Arlea listened quite frankly, tapping her foot to the measures.

“There was a man with a double chin
Who performed with skill on the violin,
And he played in time and he played in tune
But he never played anything but old Zip
Coon ——”

As before, several voices sang the chorus, the un-

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certain bass singer once again rumbling fearsomely along in the general vicinity of the key and interpolating words of his own. It was very funny, but after the third verse it began to grow a bit monotonous; and at the beginning of the fifth the words blurred in Arlea's consciousness, mingling hazily with certain associated ideas that carried her out of her present hateful environment.

When — or whether — they started on the sixth verse she never knew, for she was fast asleep and dreaming in the red chair, sitting before the fire that had died to coals heaped and glowing like red eyes in the darkness.

It seemed to her that she had no more than nodded a bit and closed her eyes for a moment, when the noises in the barroom rose louder than ever, the storm and the wind seemed to increase to a steady roar, unending, indescribably ominous. The men in the saloon were drunk and fighting, she thought; their voices were terribly loud and angry, and certain words were strangely reiterated. It was like a mob — and just as she was telling her mother that it was only some drunken crowd passing by on the street, the penetrating shriek of a woman slashed away her dream and left her awake and standing on the hearth, staring bewilderedly at the luridly lighted room and a strange lambent glare outside that illumined the stormy night and re-

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vealed the sleety slant lines of rain with startling distinctness.

“Hold that squaw!” A peremptory voice shouted fiercely in the hall. “The whole upstairs is a furnace! She can’t go up — get outa the way! I’ll go! Wet a couple of blankets, some of you, and come on!”

Arlea never afterward remembered going to the door and pulling it open, but she must have done so without conscious volition, for she found herself standing in the doorway, staring up into what she dazedly thought must be the hell she had been taught to believe was a horrific reality, all heat and yellow flame and a fiendish crackling and snapping, with downward swirls of hot, choking smoke. Faces turned toward her, eyes stared. A confused shouting broke out anew, one voice rising above the rest.

“*Here she is!* She ain’t upstairs! Come down, Lew! *Come down, you damn’ fool!*”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FIRE

STRANGLING, coughing as a pungent cloud of smoke surged after him, Laughing Lew came staggering down the stairs clinging to the banister, one hand held tight over his smarting eyes.

"Can't — make it," he gasped, when eager hands clutched at him and pulled him away from the banister. "It's hell! You say — she's here?"

"Right here, Lew. The squaw made a mistake, that's all. There ain't nobody upstairs." Baldy, the curly-haired young cowboy it was who pulled him away.

"All right." Lew stood up blinking. "Nearly got me, that time. Come on — we'll save what we can, boys. Into the kitchen, some of you! Save the grub first. Any beds downstairs? Save all the bedding you can. Baldy, come back here! Let the liquor go 'til the last! Grub and blankets — they're the main point, now."

He turned, gave Arlea one appraising look, glanced at Lubelle, started down the hall and immediately whirled back to them.

"You women can drag out some stuff from the parlor; the carpet, and what chairs you can.

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Choose things really useful. Keep this door shut. Break a window — and you,” — he looked at Arlea, — “carry the stuff back out of the way when the squaw throws it out. *Hustle!* The roof’ll be falling in, first you know!” He rushed off down the hall, leaving Arlea staring after him.

Lubelle caught her by the arm, dragged her inside the parlor and slammed the door, shutting out most of the smoke and a little of the uproar.

“The house is burning up because of your anger against the young men,” she hissed, stabbing at the cause of the disaster after the Indian habit of thought. “You said I must bring hot coals in a kettle. Now they are burning the house. Your room is burnt and all that you have. It is the wrath of God that would punish you for the sin that was in your heart.”

“Oh. Was it? About all He seems to do is punish. Why doesn’t He try loving and being kind? I hate a God that does nothing but watch for little sins to wreak His vengeance on!” Arlea flung both arms out, laughed wildly and rushed to the red chair where she had sat and dreamed of the mother whom God had taken from her — or so she had been told. Her blind rage vented itself upon the chair. It was heavy, but she did not feel the weight of it as she picked it up, ran to the nearest window and hurled the chair with all

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her might. It crashed through with a tinkling of broken glass scarce heard in the general commotion.

The God she had just railed at must have urged her through the window, for it was no reason of her own that drove her into the night. A frenzy of headlong fury possessed her. She climbed out, felt the heat from the burning roof strike through the melting sleet upon her head, tossed the blown locks impatiently out of her eyes and once more grasped the inoffensive chair, lifted it high and rushed out across the flooded road. Behind her came Lubelle Wan-washe, walking backwards and dragging the heavy horsehair sofa.

Arlea flung the chair down spitefully and started back, tripped when one slipper heel pegged deep into stiff mud, staggered, regained her balance with an effort and went on limping, her stockinged foot shrinking from the icy mud and water. She had almost reached the broken window when a part of the roof fell in with a crash and a spouting geyser of sparks.

"I suppose that's my fault, too," she cried distractedly, turning as a hand was laid on her arm.

"You didn't work a spell on it, did you?" Liz Porter, tall and gaunt, with a faded brown shawl over her head, leaned and peered into Arlea's face. "I knew something bad was goin' to happen — I been havin' the awfulest dreams lately, and always

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it's been about trapped animals tryin' to git loose. That means a spell is being worked against somebody, and they can't free themselves because they don't know what's goin' on. I bin wakin' up in a cold sweat every mornin' lately. Is everybody out? When I seen the fire I hunted up my little black book and wrote down the spell against fire — but I dunno. Looks like it's purty late to use it." She drew a heavy, earthenware plate from under her arm and gazed at it doubtfully. Both sides were covered with crude, meaningless letters done in charcoal.

"You stand right here while I go throw this plate into the fire. They say it never fails; a fire'll squench right down the minute the plate hits the flames. But I dunno as I can git close enough."

With her faded shawl shielding her face from the terrific heat, the woman ran splashing heedlessly through puddles until she could go no farther, drew back an arm and heaved the plate as far as she could send it with an awkward overthrow cast, purely feminine, wholly ineffective. The plate fell short and broke into many pieces over a rock. Liz Porter groaned and retreated from the blasts of furnace heat.

"That's a turrible bad sign," she said. "But I ain't one to give up till I've done all I know. There's one more charm 't my gran'mother always

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used to put out fire — an' they say it never failed her." She faced about, folded her arms inside her shawl and solemnly shouted in a slow, chanting tone:

“ ‘Our dear Sarah journeyed through the land
Having a fiery, hot brand in her hand.
The fiery brand heats
The fiery brand sweats.
Fiery brand stop your heat;
Fiery brand, stop your sweat!’ ”

Three times she repeated the formula, for therein lay the charm, made three crosses in the air. She stood motionless for another space, waited for results — and saw the remainder of the roof fall in. Liz Porter gave a cluck of disappointment and turned to Arlea.

“ Well,” she shouted above the roar of the fire, “ I’ve done all I could. It does seem like there’s a spell on this valley. How’d it start? Them W Bar boys git to cuttin’ up an’ set the house afire? ”

“ No.” Arlea huddled her shawl up over her dripping hair. “ I suppose I am to blame. Lubelle says I am.”

“ Well,” Liz Porter observed philosophically after an uncomfortable pause, “ I hope now ’t I’ll see Andy once in a coon’s age. He won’t be able to hang around Kentucky Joe’s saloon no more, that’s one thing shore! ”

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Arlea looked at her, vaguely attracted to the woman in spite of her gypsyish belief in spells. One edge of the shawl held out over her bent arm to shield her face from the intolerable heat, she retreated slowly, driven back as the lower walls of the building caught fire and began to blaze.

"You wouldn't think them logs would burn, after the soakin' they been gettin' all evenin'," Liz Porter screamed in her habitually strained, harsh voice. "But I s'pose they're dry as a burnt bone under the bark — and then ketchin' inside like it done, they'd plumb *have* to burn. Where's the preacher at? You shore he's out? Accordin' to my dreams of trapped animals ——"

"He went right out after supper to visit that horrid old sot they call Dutch Henry."

In spite of herself Arlea was slipping into a friendlier mood, her hunger for companionship responding instinctively to this gaunt old woman's garrulous presence. Even with her desert-browened face and her unkempt appearance and her charms that didn't work, Liz seemed closer to Arlea than any one else. In a town that had burned witches not so long ago, Arlea had known many a stern old grandmother who believed ardently in dreams and all sorts of omens and spells, so that she was not so utterly shocked and repelled as she would otherwise have been. Her disbelief was at least tolerant.

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“Good land! Does that preacher think he c’n save that old pill?” Liz shifted her own rusty-brown shawl again to protect her seamed face from the heat. “My conscience! Dutch Henry may have a soul, but it’s been pickled in whisky so long ’t even the Lord wouldn’t reco’nize it. Andy says he’s havin’ snakes agin. I wish the preacher joy of his job! Well,” she added half regretfully, “then he’s accounted fer. It ain’t him caught inside. But you mark my words, Arlea. Somebuddy’s goin’ to be caught in a trap ’t they can’t git out of. I don’t have them dreams for nothin’. I wouldn’t let Andy take the mail out, this trip, just on account of the warnin’s I been gittin’ lately. ’F he’d gone, he’d ’a’ been caught out in this storm an’ struck by lightnin’ or somethin’. I know it just as well as ’t I’m standin’ here. I been sayin’ over all the charms, but it looks like somebuddy’s been a spellbindin’ this place. Even the Injuns is affected — and that means the spell’s on the hull valley. Ain’t it an awful storm? My back’s freezin’ and all this heat goin’ to waste! That wind goes right through a person.” For the first time she looked more attentively at Arlea and observed the plight of the shivering girl.

“My good land, child! Ain’t you got nothin’ on your feet but them little thin slippers? You’ll ketch your death! Come on back here in the

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porch of this cabin, outa the wind. I declare if it ain't spittin' snow along with the rain! We're in for it, shore's you're knee high to a toad! Ain't your feet 'most froze?"

"They're numb," Arlea admitted meekly. "One slipper's out there in the mud."

"I will give you my moccasins," Lubelle stated primly from the porch where she had withdrawn for shelter. "Then I will find shoes for myself. Come here, Arlea, where the rain will not fall on you. Then you can put my moccasins on your feet."

"No." Arlea shook her head. "I'm all right, just as I am. Do you think I never had wet feet before?"

At the edge of the small crowd of men that went scurrying back and forth at the rear of the burning building like disturbed ants, two figures halted for a brief interchange of speech, and one pointed across the road to where the women stood huddled on the porch plainly revealed in the yellow glare. The other made a gesture of assent and started in their direction, running heavily through the mud.

"For the land's sake, what's struck Milt?" Liz Porter commented, a New England twang in her voice now that her first excitement was over.

"You come on over to the store, Miss Owen," Milt called when he was near enough to be heard. "I'll go fix you a bed in the office, and the squaw

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can stay with you. I guess we've saved about all we can, and there ain't much more to be done." He looked at the girl commiseratingly. "Lost about all you had, I s'pose."

"Why — yes, everything except the clothes I have on — and one of my slippers is stuck in the mud, over there!" Arlea gave a mirthless little laugh.

"It is? Well, this ain't no night to be goin' barefoot, Miss. I'll just carry you over to the store and in the mornin' we'll see what the ol' town can scare up in the way of women fixin's. Up you come!" He lifted her in his arms as if she were a child.

"No, no! I can walk!" Arlea protested. But Liz Porter stopped her with a motherly rebuke.

"For the land's sake, don't be silly! Milt's old enough to be your father — and then some! Let him carry you over this mud and slush."

"I have found the slipper," Lubelle announced calmly, walking behind them. "But it is no good when it is full of mud."

Before the fireplace in the store Milt set his burden carefully down on a bench. A pleasant atmosphere of snug comfort pervaded the place, and the heaped coals before the lazily smoking backlog still glowed warmly. Milt stooped and raked out the coals before throwing on a half dozen sticks of dry

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pine branch wood that immediately began to blaze.

"They'll all be in here huggin' the fire before mornin'," he remarked. "An overdose of fire is worse than not enough. It's goin' to be pretty tough on the town, tryin' to git along without the old shebang — and it shore is too bad you lost all your things, Miss Owen! Liz," he began banteringly to change a disagreeable subject, "what's the matter with that charm-book of yours? Why wasn't you up there puttin' out the fire with some of that fee-fo-fum?"

"None o' your business!" Liz snapped back at him, her face turning red.

"It was too late to do good with the medicine talk," Lubelle gravely observed. "The white witch doctor tried, but the bad spirits are too strong to-night. They broke the medicine plate before it reached the fire."

"Now, Liz, you see you can't cover up nothin' in this town!" Milt laughed. "The white witch doctor! Wait till I tell Andy that!"

"You go to grass," said Mrs. Porter, "and eat apple sass!"

Arlea started at the familiar, meaningless retort of her childhood, and glanced up at Milt Frisbee, half expecting him to put out his tongue in derision — that being the conventional answer to the

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impudent phrase. She caught only a twinkle in the big man's eyes, however. Evidently his teasing mood had left him for he turned away toward the office, signing Lubelle to go and help him.

Arlea spread the draggled, mud-stained ruffles on her skirt to dry before the fire, and thrust her little stockinged feet out toward the blaze. After all, since the final calamity had fallen and the future was already so black that it could not be worse, why look at it at all? A revulsion of mood drove her to an apathy which was a negative kind of peace. Let the future be what it would; to-night she was sitting before a cheerful fire of resinous pine branches, safe from the storm that still howled outside the thick rock walls of the store. To-night she had shelter, and presently she would curl up somewhere and sleep. To-morrow would be time enough for facing the future.

She was fast asleep in the little office when the men came in wet and weary from their volunteer firefighting. She did not know that they walked softly in fear of breaking her slumber, nor that they talked in muttered undertones while they dried themselves out before the fireplace. She slept peacefully through the subdued commotion of Burt Gaylord's arrival — he having ridden home in haste through the storm when he saw the ominous glow in the sky.

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She did not waken until morning spread a cold, white light over the little room, and she sat up bewildered, trying to identify her surroundings and that curious swishing sound mingled with a peculiar, shrill whistling that seemed to come from nowhere in particular and to saturate the air with evil portent.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SNOW-BOUND

SOMETIME between midnight and dawn bleak winter had pounced upon the lonely mountain valley like a predatory animal creeping up unawares in the wake of the rain-storm. When the tired sleepers crawled reluctantly from their makeshift beds, the ruins of Kentucky Joe's hotel were miraculously disguised, shrouded beneath a thick winding sheet of snow. Behind the meager little settlement White Pine peak stood austere white, seen through a silver haze of wind-blown snow. The high range across the valley was blotted from sight behind that intangible, shifting white wall.

Whisky Flat itself was made beautiful with the chill, forbidding beauty of heaped drifts unmarked by any print save where the wind passed boisterously along. Now the twisted gray sage bushes were rounded white domes, the mesquite trees by the ditch were fairy-fashioned, each little branch feathered with ice and frozen snow, and over all the sifting white veil blown aslant in the storm.

While Arlea, a blanket drawn around her shivering shoulders, gazed out wide eyed upon the incredible transformation, a man came laboring up

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the obliterated trail, wallowing waist deep in drifts, lifting his knees high with every step, planting each foot with careful deliberation. A big man he was, with broad, snow-whitened shoulders, hat pulled low over his eyebrows, head tilted to shield his face from the sting of the snow. As he halted before the store, looking up before he tackled the highest drift of them all, his eyes met full the girl's intent gaze.

Lew Wheeler — she recognized him then with an unexplainable, pinched feeling in her throat — swept off his hat and gave her an elaborate bow; threw back his head and laughed when she drew back from the window without acknowledging the salute, and came floundering up the buried steps. His voice was the cheeriest thing in the valley as he came surging into the store with a demand for coffee, and the offer of fresh venison in exchange.

"That old cabin down by the corral is headquarters for the W Bar boys while this storm lasts," Arlea, frankly listening through the thin partition, heard him say. "Hello, Burt! Do you think dad will worry much if I wait to help round up our cattle before I show up at the ranch? How did he seem to feel about our delay?"

Perhaps Burt Gaylord believed her still asleep, for his answer was low-voiced and Arlea could hear their footsteps retreating to the rear of the long

Snow-Bound

room. She was cold in the office and she heard the crackling of the fire in the store. She would not let that young ruffian think she was afraid of him!

With a hasty patting of her hair into place and a straightening of rumpled skirts she opened the door and went out, silently slipping across the hand-sawed plank floor in the moccasins Lubelle had given her. A pretty picture she made on that gloomy morning, but no one seemed to remember her existence, being completely absorbed by what threatened to be a fresh catastrophe.

Kentucky Joe was in a dangerous state of collapse, brought on by the tragedy of losing his hotel, and the exposure he had suffered while fighting the fire. That strange whistling sound which Arlea had attributed to the wind was the sibilant breathing of Joe's tortured lungs. He lay on a crude couch of blankets before the fire, propped up, fighting pitifully for every breath he drew. Hat off and head bowed, Laughing Lew stood staring at the pathetic figure while the snow melted on his shoulders and trickled down in great drops sliding one after the other like hurrying tears.

"This is the very hell," he was saying as Arlea came up to the fire. "Doesn't any one know what to do for him? Dad's murder on bullet and arrow wounds, and I know all about setting broken bones

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—but I'm stumped on this. I know that a wind-broken horse is ruined, but when it's a man, a fellow has just naturally got to *do* something! ”

“ I've rubbed him with turpentine,” Gaylord said glumly, “but I can't see that it helped him any. He's whistled and wheezed ever since I first knew him — I didn't think anything of it; nobody ever did. It was just Kentucky Joe's habit; but damn it, Lew, he's a dangerously sick man! It's a case where a woman ought to take hold, with poultices or something — messes such as they used to stew up when I was a boy. But the widow Jensen is laid up in her cabin with rheumatism in her knees, Milt told me. She's a great nurse if she could get around. The only other woman is Andy Porter's wife, — and she'd get out her charm book and try to cure him with a wolf's tooth tied up in a mullein leaf and buried under a tombstone, or some such fool thing. And the squaw has disappeared — something gave her a scare about evil spirits, I suppose. She came in at daylight, took one look at Joe here and flitted out of sight. So that ends that. I wonder if your father ——”

“ I can take care of him, Mr. Gaylord,” Arlea interrupted him eagerly. “My grandfather had asthma terribly before he died, and I have often helped mother nurse him. But I think Joe has congestion of the lungs. I'll want ——”

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“You?” Gaylord whirled and stared at her with an odd light in his flaming blue eyes — so very like her own, had either of them known it. “I thought you ——”

“It’s going to be very draughty here with people coming and going,” she said calmly, though the hot blood tinged her cheek. “He should be in a smaller room that can be kept warm. That fever will have to be broken, first thing ——” She stopped, glanced nervously from one to the other and threw up her hands, the fingers tightly interlaced. “Oh, if you two wouldn’t just stand and *look* at me, I could do something, maybe!”

“Where’s that coffee?” Laughing Lew demanded sharply of Gaylord. “Great storekeeper, you are! The boys will be ready to lynch me if I don’t get back with their coffee!”

“I’ll try and fix a place for Joe,” Gaylord muttered over his shoulder as he retreated, Laughing Lew treading close on his heels.

They eyed her surreptitiously while Gaylord mechanically scooped coffee from a canvas bag.

“She could have that cabin we’re in,” Lew offered in a discreet undertone, “but it’s quite a ways down there ——”

“I can clean out the assay office,” Gaylord said with a deprecating glance in the direction of the fireplace. “That’s just across the road out here,

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and the boys can shovel a path. It's a log cabin and it can be kept warm. See if you can find that squaw, will you, Lew? She can help clean it out."

"Better feed the girl, hadn't you, Burt?" Laughing Lew stood thoughtful, buttoning his coat before venturing again out into the storm. "I've an idea she missed her supper last night! Looks hungry, to me."

"I can't cook for a woman," Gaylord grumbled. "If she's too helpless to do it, Milt will cook breakfast when he gets back. He went to see how the preacher is getting along with Dutch Henry." The coffee tied, he walked with Lew as far as the door.

"I thought she and the preacher would be gone out of the valley by this time," he confided impulsively as Lew lingered with one hand on the latch, as a man is likely to do when the parting is friendly. "Miss Owen seemed to grudge every minute she spent here. They ought to have gone the day I left for your place. What kept them I don't know, of course; afraid of the weather, perhaps. Now it looks as if the road will be blocked for a week or two, if this storm doesn't ease up to-day."

"You bet it will be blocked for a week or two!" Lew chuckled involuntarily as he glanced toward the back of the store. "When our herd stampeded, just inside the Pass, it sounded to me like a landslide somewhere. And the boys that were bringing

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up the drag told me that the north wall of the Pass came down in a tremendous big slide. Deacon said he looked back and it seemed to him that the whole mountain was falling into the Pass. Of course it wasn't — but if the road isn't blocked I'll eat my hat! I wouldn't say anything to the girl, until you have to, Burt. Seems to have her war paint on and her tomahawk raised, as it is. If she has to stay in the valley awhile ——”

“She won't. Not if I can help it,” Gaylord exclaimed, and squared his jaw.

“Why, Burt? Did she call you names, too?” Laughing Lew's eyes were dancing with suppressed mirth.

“I don't like preachers,” Gaylord snapped as Lew pulled open the door. “I certainly don't mean to spend the winter with one stuck here under my nose; nor with a girl as narrow and full of false pride and bigotry as Miss Arlea Owen! Those two would claim all the sympathy — but it would be pretty damned hard on the rest of us, let me tell you!”

“Some of the boys won't think so,” Lew laconically observed as he opened the door and pushed out into the storm and went plowing back down the road, following his tracks that were already blurred and half filled with snow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“MEBBY-SO SICK GO 'WAY”

BROTHER VAN had spent the night chiefly in sweeping purple-and-yellow lizards off the ceiling and out of the frowsy corners of Dutch Henry's dug-out. Since the window must be tightly blanketed to shut out the glaring eyes of more horrific monsters, and the door must on no account be opened lest a certain polka-dotted snake of gigantic proportions should come looping in to crawl upon Dutch Henry's bed, no hint of the night's happenings farther down the road could come to the knowledge of the little preacher.

Daylight found him half stupefied with bad air and bone weariness, and when his patient at last forgot his imaginary terrors and settled into a heavy sleep, Brother Van huddled a blanket around him and went to sleep also, lying on the dirt floor beside the rock-and-mud fireplace.

He was still snoring gently when Milt Frisbee opened the door and walked in. Milt looked at the home-made broom standing beside the bed and nodded in complete understanding. He himself had nursed Dutch Henry through an attack of tremens before now, and he knew all about the polka-dotted snake as big around as a barrel, and the flock of

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purple-and-yellow lizards that threatened to drop down from the ceiling.

He hadn't the heart to waken Brother Van for the purpose of telling him bad news. Now that he was here, Milt saw that no good could be gained from the telling, and much harm might come of a rough awakening of the two sleepers. The little preacher's face was the color of old tallow, his eyes were sunken in brown hollows, and his nostrils looked pinched. Milt very cautiously put more wood on the fire — a small stick was sufficient to heat that mean room, dug into the hillside as it was — and stealthily as a thief he set about boiling a pot of coffee.

Even the delectable aroma failed to awaken the sleepers, however, so Milt contented himself with two large cups of the bitter-strong concoction, and sat down to smoke and doze while he waited. Burt Gaylord was thoroughly competent to handle the situation at the store, he thought drowsily, and the morning was too wild for unnecessary peregrinations. He would therefore stay where he was and perhaps take the preacher's place for the day. For although Dutch Henry was no particular asset to the community when he was sober and was a serious handicap when drunk, every white man owed the obligation of race to his fellows. Although Dutch Henry and Whisky Flat might benefit by his demise, he

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must nevertheless be pulled through this sickness if possible.

So Milt's thoughts ran vaguely while he nodded before the fire, and the heavy breathing of the two exhausted men wove a little mumbling accompaniment to his thoughts — until presently Milt Frisbee himself drifted off into dreams.

In the miraculously swept and garnished assay office that had once been the living quarters of Dolf Norton (now paying the penalty of his greed by digging away at a mine of doubtful value which he had all but stolen from Burt Gaylord) Arlea stood with her shawl hanging loose from her shoulders and stared intently at two objects which held a poignant significance because of the part they had played in her short stay in Whisky Flat.

Of all the conglomerate mass of furniture contained within the hotel, only two articles from the parlor had been saved; the red velvet chair in which she had been dreaming when the alarm of fire was raised, and the horsehair-covered sofa that had been the scene of Laughing Lew's astounding performance with the venison steak. Stained with exposure to the storm; with blobs of dried mud stuck to the legs in crude reminder of the roadway where Arlea and the squaw had left them standing stilted and forlorn after the effort of saving them from the

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fire, there they stood, mutely offering her the memory of a shelter she had despised and so had lost; a youthful friendliness she had repulsed with contempt and so had turned to distrust and resentment.

“Well, he *was* drunk!” She whispered the words with vicious emphasis, and threw her shawl over the sofa to hide the place where she had sat while Laughing Lew implored her to smile “—both of you.” An involuntary twinkle dodged into her eyes at that particular recollection, an incipient dimple lurked at the corner of her mouth. Youth told her he had been funny in spite of his drunkenness. But he had called her a brazen jade — a girl of the dance hall. A man who would dare say that to a decent girl ought to be shot! He had told Brother Van to go in and pray for the brazen jade! Oh, she had heard that, plainly enough! Goodness, he had shouted it for every one in the hotel to hear!

She moved across the room, and rearranged the gay blankets on the bed they had hastily made up for Joe. She would need plenty of water, flannel for the hot packs she meant to use on his poor inflamed lungs, meat for broth. Though the young men had announced that the cabin was ready, there was still much to be done to make it a fit place for a sick man.

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The table of hand-sawed planks was still cluttered with retorts, acid, ore samples, test tubes, stained crucibles — all the paraphernalia of an assayer who suffered odds and ends to accumulate in a general disorder. The corner behind the door was heaped with other discarded equipment. The floor, swept as clean as a man could sweep it with furious energy and an old broom, was stained with charcoal dust around the high, forgelike fireplace. A young man they called Baldy had suggested scrubbing the floor, but Arlea had refused to risk her patient's life for the sake of cleanliness.

"Oh, well, it's clean dirt, anyway!" Baldy had yielded good-naturedly, and had gone off to help make a stretcher for Kentucky Joe's short journey to the improvised hospital ward.

Other W Bar boys were completing a path, shoveling it to the bare sand of the roadway and swearing into their frosty mufflers because the wind persisted in hurling fresh snow in upon the meticulous passage they had cut through the drifts.

Arlea, watching for Joe, eyed the work with interest and an odd expectation that the W Bar boys would presently be building a snow man. They seemed exuberantly capable of any schoolboy performance, she thought, and suddenly the buffalo dance of last evening stood forth in her memory for what it was: a hilarious bit of foolery impelled

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by nothing more vicious than a boyish reaction from their wearisome plodding behind the herd of cattle in the storm. The one they called Baldy reminded her of a young man back home; more vociferous, perhaps, but with the same kindly good nature underneath his boisterousness. Now she knew that he was the one who had roared that terrible, off-key bass in last night's singing. She rather liked Baldy.

She saw them go tramping back to the store when Gaylord appeared and waved a peremptory, beckoning hand. They were going to bring Kentucky Joe. Arlea turned from the window, pulled a blanket from the bed and held it stretched before the fire, turning it this way and that so that every fold would be saturated with the heat. It would be a marvel if they saved Joe's life, and she must not overlook the most trivial detail that would swing the fight in his favor.

“Doesn't any one know what became of Lubelle?” Arlea asked of the four who brought Joe in and placed him in bed. “I need her so! I wish you'd please see where she went. I can't understand her going away like this.”

“There was hoss tracks leadin' away from the corrals when I went down this mornin',” Andy Porter told her sympathetically. “Looks to me like she put fer the Injun camp.”

“Them tracks was made by Laughin' Lew,” Lem

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Davis declared. "He struck out for the ranch, early. His dad's been lookin' for us in, and Lew wanted to go and report."

"Then Lubelle must be in camp somewhere," Arlea worried. "It isn't like her at all. I never knew her to do such a thing before — when she knows I need her!"

"My wife, Liz, 'll be over purty soon," Andy reassured her. "We been waitin' to see if the weather wouldn't let up some. Say, Miss Owen, d'you know you got a trunk down in your wagon? I noticed it as I was lookin' around for somethin' I could rig up for a sled. Now you lost everything in the fire last night, mebby you might want somethin' out of that trunk. If yuh do, I'll see 't you git it."

Arlea glanced down at her bedraggled skirt, flushed and nodded. The trunk was packed with her mother's sober belongings; but necessity overrode sentiment, in clothes as in everything else. Her own girlish dresses were gone — her money, everything. She bit her lips cruelly to keep back the tears, ashamed to weep over her own small loss when poor old Joe was likely to lose his life. Would she be to blame for his death? She looked at his fever flushed cheeks, his glazed eyes staring helplessly from face to face, dumbly imploring them to help him draw the breath into his lungs — so simple

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a performance as that! It was heartbreaking; she could not meet his eyes, but bent over the table pretending to be very busy with her remedies.

It was a cruel farce. Andy Porter, and all the others were giving her sidelong glances of curiosity and respect. Helpless themselves, they looked to her — because she was a woman, and the women of those days naturally assumed the office of nursing the sick.

“Here comes your squaw!” From the doorway Andy Porter gave a subdued whoop. “Went clear down to the Injun camp — an’ if that ain’t old Annie Green-Leaves, I’m a liar!” He swung about and began clawing at snow-cruusted coat sleeves. “Git outa here, boys — we ain’t wanted no more!”

They pushed out and hurried single file to the store porch that had been shoveled clean of snow, and waited there while a horse and a mule came lunging heavily through the drifts. In the lead, Lubelle Wan-washe rode Abinadab, her black braids clogged with snow where they showed beside her wind-whipped cheeks. Behind her came the tough little mule, flopping his long ears in time with the drumming heels of the fat old squaw who bestrode him, a small mountain of swarthy flesh that had, somewhere concealed within the gross body, a soul of sweetness and unselfish devotion. At the store steps old Annie rolled off and waddled up to Andy.

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"Where Joe?" she grunted. "I come, mebbly-so sick go 'way."

"Where is Arlea?" Lubelle interposed her stilted question.

Andy grinned beneath his big, drooping mustache and flung out an arm toward the assay office, where the snow was beginning to melt on the roof next the chimney.

"Over there — both of 'em."

As the two Indian women crossed the road and entered the cabin he heaved a great sigh of thankfulness.

"That old squaw's a lalla-paloozer when it comes to doctorin'," he remarked. "See that bundle she took in with her? Them's mountain yarbs. Oh, Joe's good as cured — if that dang asthmy don't kill him off 'fore Annie can git started in on him.

"Come on, boys — le's sled the girl's trunk an' stuff up here from the wagon. You ain't goin' to be able to gether no cattle to-day! They're huggin' the brush along the crick, and they'll hang in there till this storm's over ——"

"Aw, teach yer gran'mother to skim milk!" Lige Willard impatiently interrupted. "Guess we know the heart of a cow-critter as good as any old stage-driver. Come on, boys — we'll git the girl's trunk and then I can skin the bunch of you in a poker game!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"THEY CALL HIM BLACK THUNDER"

ANTELOPE VALLEY lay locked fast in the chill embrace of winter; or so Lem Davis declared, in a voice calculated to reach the ears of Arlea who stood before the fire in the store. He gave a wink and a nod and a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the girl, which pantomime his companions understood as nullifying any serious poetical intent. "Cold bride of the snows," he added, with a roll of his eyes.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Davis?" Arlea turned and walked toward the group; a quaint figure in her mother's voluminous brown skirt and plain, tight basque, with a lace fichu pinned at the throat with a heavy gold brooch. Above the sober gown her hair shone like river-washed gold, and her eyes were the color of the far mountains at sunset. "Do you mean that we can't get to Pioche?"

"No, ma'am, not unless you can fly, you can't." Lem lifted his fur cap from his head and smoothed his hair with a hasty palm. "Wouldn't su'prise me none if you done that," he added with heavy gallantry, "but the preacher 'll have to stay on a spell."

"I can't fly," Arlea smiled ruefully.

"Then you ain't the angel you look to be," Lem

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told her with such sober earnestness that even Arlea had to laugh at him.

"Never mind the flattery," she rebuked him when the chortles had dwindled a bit. "Tell me the truth, Mr. Davis — or some one. You've been out in the valley, all of you. Just what did you find?"

"Injuns killin' W Bar cattle," Lige Willard blurted. "Wait till Laughing Lew gits back! The fur 'll fly then!"

"Shut up!" Little Baldy set his boot-heel painfully down on Lige's toes. "There's been a big slide in the Pass, Miss Owen, and the road's a hill. Can't tell where it used to be, even. So ——"

"Shut up!" Lem Davis whispered, and gave Baldy a vicious prod in the diaphragm. "I'll tell you the truth, Miss Owen — never mind this gabby bunch. They don't know nothin' about it. The truth is that she's a big old valley, and bein' blockaded for awhile ain't bad at all. You won't mind it a bit, and I know the rest of us won't. Why ——"

"Then we *are* shut in the valley?" Arlea's voice was flat with emotion sternly repressed. "Do you mean we can't get out at — *at all*?"

Lem Davis gulped, and certain elbows moved backward toward the nearest ribs with sly, prodding gestures.

"Well, now — as to that, I couldn't say, ma'am.

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We ain't been anywhere except down toward the Pass. We've been gatherin' up our cattle ——”

“Won't it make trouble with the Indians if they know you found out they've been stealing cattle?” A look of fear crept into Arlea's eyes. “They're dangerous when everything doesn't go to suit them. When we came here they were all right around the store, on the warpath. They — they saw us or heard us, and they made Lubelle and me get out of the wagon, and Brother Van had to get off his horse, and they were crowding around us and acting awfully savage until the leader was shot — right out here by this very store! Even Lubelle was scared, and she's an Indian. If you go quarreling with them you'll get them all stirred up again. That night, they shot an arrow and wounded ——”

“Yeah, I know all that,” Lem interrupted, forgetting his good manners in his haste to gloss certain unpleasant facts. “That was just a little ruckus among themselves; didn't amount to nothin' atall. Injuns is like cattle a whole lot. One dies and they smell blood and commence to paw an' beller around and have a great ole tail-ringin'; but it don't mean nothin' — er — not with cattle, er —— It was prob'ly wolves that's been killin' cattle down by the crick.” Lem, having extricated himself from his metaphor, edged away with a crimson countenance.

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"Say, wolves don't wear moccasins!" Lige Willard tactlessly broke in upon Lem's smooth explanation. "And they don't pack off the carcass, nor build fires ——"

"Go awn off and shut up!" Lem growled, kicking backward at Lige as he halted at the edge of the group.

"You won't dare say anything, if they did kill cattle," Arlea urged, looking from one to the other imploringly. "You wouldn't dare make them angry. I know even Lubelle has to be handled just so or the Indian in her crops up and she looks so savage — I'm actually afraid of her. And she's a Christian and supposed to be civilized! Can't you speak to — to Mr. Wheeler ——"

"Say!" Lem's voice returning to the argument, was charged with pride. "Talk about stirrin' up the Injun in your squaw, why, say! They's a devil in Lew Wheeler that ——" He stopped abruptly as some one nudged warning. "Excuse me, ma'am, I mean ——"

"I am quite well aware of the fact that Mr. Wheeler is a ruffian and a brute," Arlea stated distinctly. "But surely you gentlemen can use your influence and prevent trouble. You will, won't you? Please!"

Followed the sound of boot soles scraping the floor as the group uneasily shifted position.

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“Promise me you won’t quarrel with the Indians, no matter what happens! When I was in Palisade I heard of terrible things Indians have done to white people they had a grudge against. These Indians have a new chief now, and he’s very nice, Lubelle says; but the savage is there if you make him angry — and they are so proud and touchy! Won’t you please promise not to molest them in any way?”

The W Bar boys had never before encountered that flaming eagerness in Arlea’s eyes, and it went to their heads like Kentucky Joe’s hot toddies.

Recklessly they promised. Arlea shook hands all around to solemnize the pact and told them she was very sure they would not break their word, and that they would never regret it.

“Even if they did eat a cow or two, what’s a cow against a massacre?” She reasoned with them naïvely. “They probably needed meat, with this storm coming on unexpectedly so they couldn’t hunt. Lubelle says they burned up nearly all their supplies at the funeral of their chief. She says they will suffer from hunger this winter, unless something is done for them. Brother Van intends to speak to the authorities about it the minute we reach Pioche. Lubelle has got him all stirred up over it.”

“Yeah — well, he’s goin’ to have lots of time to

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calm down, by the looks of that Pass," little Baldy opined. "'Course, if this snow goes off ——"

"Oh, it must!" Arlea perhaps did not realize the note of disapproval in her voice.

"Sure, it'll have to!" Lem bantered daringly. "We got real obligin' weather, Miss Owen. It'll quit any time, to please a lady."

"Will it really? That's better than some men I could name will do!" Arlea laughed in his face.

"Ain't we just promised to wink the other eye when W Bar cattle is butchered under our noses, to please a lady?" Baldy demanded grievously.

"I didn't know they had been butchered under your nose to please a lady," Arlea retorted pertly. "You should have told me that before."

"Aw — ketch a feller up on his grammar!" Baldy protested in the midst of much laughter. "You ought to talk with Lew. He swallowed a grammar whole, they tell me, and he eats po'try every mornin' for breakfast. He can talk purty, when he wants to."

"Which isn't often, I should imagine. Do you know what the Indians call him? Lubelle was telling me just this morning. They say he has a demon for a soul — which may be true, for all I know; I'm sure his actions show it! — and some hunters saw him riding a fiend that took the form of a horse, and he came in a black cloud with the thunder for

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hoof beats. Down in the village they call him Black Thunder. They say he has put a curse on the valley and sent the storm to freeze the papooses in their mother's arms.” Arlea's eyes sparkled with malicious enjoyment as she looked from one to the other. “You had better tell him to be careful, for the Indians aren't very gentle with bad spirits. They cast them out rather painfully. Lubelle says he must never go near the village or he'll find himself in trouble. And that's why,” she added impressively, “you must be very careful not to do or say anything that will make the Indians any angrier.”

“Say, if they go to monkeying with Lew they'll find there's something worse than black thunder to fight!” Lem Davis angrily declared. “They'll find seven devils in that boy's hide — and every one a fighter. Say, Miss Owen, I wish you'd shake hands backwards and undo that promise I made. I was kinda hasty. You'd ought to of told us they had it in for Lew, 'cause any scrap Lew gits into is our fight — don't make no mistake about that.”

“That's right,” spoke up Deacon Allen, the silent one who seldom laughed. “This Black Thunder idea puts a different face on things.”

“But not a fighting face, Mr. Allen.”

“Say, did you ever try soft-soapin' a bunch of Shoshones that's itchin' fer a fight?” Long John Woods pushed to the front of the group. “Say!

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They'll peel the smile off'n your face like you'd peel a cold biled p'tater! " As he looked around his eyes met Baldy's. " Maybe some of us better ride over and meet Lew," he added uneasily.

" Why? Is he afraid of the dark? "

In the five faces turned toward her five pairs of eyes held reproach.

" You don't know Laughin' Lew very well, I guess," Lem Davis said stiffly, and started for the door.

" Yeah! We better go and pertect the Injuns! " Baldy cried with a loud ha-ha. " Black Thunder is liable to bust loose agin, first they know! "

As they started for the door, pulling caps down over ears and jostling one another in their haste, four men came pushing in, icicles hanging to beards and eyebrows. The big, florid-faced man in the lead smacked a mittened palm down on the shoulder of Andy Porter who chanced to stand in his path to the fire.

" Where's Gaston and Gaylord? " he called peremptorily through his frosty mustache. " Sold us a worked-out, worthless claim, didn't they? Cleaned us to the bone to get even for our makin' a mistake and thinkin' Gaylord was a murderer! You know as well as I do, Andy, that we done what anybody would do. And you know he put Gaston up to foolin' us with salted samples from Little

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Creek Mine, till we dug up every cent we could rake and scrape, and bought the claim — and then he up and told us that he'd salted the mine and it wasn't worth a dollar ——”

“Took you fellers a good six months to git wind enough to holler about it, hey?” grinned Andy, and parted his droopy mustache with thumb and forefinger so that he could expectorate unhampered into the ashes. “Dolf, here, falsified them assay reports, too — I remember that,” he went on bluntly. “And you fellers was in on the swindle. You sent Kentucky Joe down to their claim in the night to *steal* them salted samples that you got so worked up over you traded in everything yuh had except the shirts on your backs, thinkin’ you was gettin’ a mine of solid gold fer a measly fifty thousand or so. Shore, I remember the hull circumstance, Hugh. So does Burt, I guess.

“Want to git a side uh sowbelly on tick? If so, you’ll have to ask Burt. He’s in charge of the store whilst Gaston is off up to Eureka.” Andy spat again and his mustache was seen to lift in a hidden smile. “Too bad yore old hotel burned down the night this storm hit the valley, or I’d take you fellers over and give yuh a drink. You look like you needed it, boys.”

The four looked at one another while they pulled ice from their whiskers and cast the small splinters

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into the flames where they hissed once and were gone. Old Jim Carver, who had built the store he now stood in, had hammered away at an indifferent government until he was granted a post-office in Whisky Flat to get rid of him, and who as a hastily elected judge had nearly hanged Burt Gaylord, flung off the last ice pencil and gave a snort.

"Yes, we're about petered out, Andy. This snow makes heavy goin', especially when a man's carryin' a back-load," he agreed, and hitched higher the small haversack on his shoulder, as if it held weight.

"Yes, Andy, we thought we'd patronize your stage once more before we bid the old valley good-bye," Dolf Norton put in, lifting his red mustache up under his big nose which canted sidewise on his face and gave a sinister expression to his countenance. "We expect to winter in St. Louis."

"Not by a yugful!" Pete Jergensen dissented. "Christiana is best place for me."

The look Andy Porter gave them held everything save pity.

"Like as not you'll visit them places — to-night, mebbly. But mornin' 'll find yuh all right back in the same old valley," he said unfeelingly. "Tomorrow may be Saturday, but that don't mean it'll be stage day."

"What's ailin' you?" Ex-Judge Carver pungently

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demanded. “Sufferin’ from chilblains again this winter? Turpentine and tallow’s good.”

“Thank yuh kindly, Judge. My chilblains ain’t as painful as corns got from traipsing after favors at the store. Burt’s over with Joe — in your old assay shop, Dolf,” he added dryly.

“We’ve got news for Burt Gaylord that will make him smart,” Hugh Whiting crowed, and eased his haversack to the counter nearest the fireplace. “Here he comes, blast him. Mr. Gaylord, you remember chargin’ us ’leven hundred dollars for Little Creek Claim, and close to forty-nine thousand for our hopes of strikin’ it rich? Well, sir, we’ve cashed in on them *hopes!*”

At the word three other haversacks plumped on the counter, yawned and slid the contents into view. Buckskin bags — and one of them Hugh Whiting tore open with eager fingers.

“Gold — damn’ near four hundred pounds of it!” he whooped. “Doubled our money on them expensive *hopes*, Mr. Gaylord! We could buy back the hull damn’ town — but we don’t want it!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“THEY’LL LIKELY STAY AWHILE”

EVEN Arlea was drawn forward by the hypnotic gleam of that little pile of yellow lumps spilled carelessly on the grimed counter. The widow Jensen had told her about the four men who had once been Whisky Flat’s solid citizens, but who had fallen into a gold-mine trap set in revenge by Burt Gaylord and baited by their own greed. The widow Jensen had said they had only got their “come-uppance” and that they were staying down at Little Creek because they were ashamed to show their faces and admit that Gaylord and Gaston had bested them so neatly at their own game.

This did not look as if they had fallen into any pit of their own digging—or if they had it was apparently a pit of gold. Like triumphant boys they were emptying the haversacks and boastfully dilating upon their good fortune, telling how they had cleaned up only the very coarsest of the gold in the amazingly rich vein they had cut.

“Next spring we’ll put in a small mill,” Dolf Norton kept injecting pompously into the hubbub. “Maybe Whisky Flat will amount to somethin’

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yet — but if it does it’ll be us that makes it a real camp! Don’t overlook that fact.”

“That’s fine!” Burt Gaylord, who might reasonably have grudged them their good fortune, spoke as if those two words came straight from the heart. “I seem to have made a mistake in condemning that claim. Well, you boys have certainly earned every ounce. You stayed with your bargain like men. I’ll shake hands with you now, because I respect your grit — even if I do still think you make darn poor lawyers! And boys, if you had come without a grain of gold I’d shake just the same. The Galloping Swede is back — came in on snowshoes this morning — and I was going to send him down in the morning with a back-load of grub. Thought you’d be running low.”

“That’s the truth,” Andy Porter testified around a fresh chew of tobacco. “I seen Burt settin’ out the beans an’ sowbelly awhile ago. I was just a foolin’ about him not trustin’ yuh fer grub. You come in here twittin’ Burt about sellin’ you a worthless claim, an’ it kinda riled me up. Guess you was foolin’, too — by the looks.” His eyes went hungrily to the heaped gold and clung there. A man apparently born to poverty was Andy Porter; always working at first one thing and then another, always missing his own goal while others surged past him to fortune. “Nice a heap of gold

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as I ever seen," he added wistfully, as he restored the piece of "twist" to his pocket.

"Practically pure," Dolf Norton, who was an assayer, loftily informed him. "Where Gaylord made his mistake was in not havin' a first-class assayer right on the works, testin' every day's muck. That's how we traced the values — away off to one side of the drift. I seen where the values went, and we followed. That's what we got." He nodded toward the heap.

"Well, we set our own price on Little Creek, and you men paid it," Gaylord observed cheerfully. "If you're satisfied we are. I'm glad you're getting back what you paid for the claim, boys. Poor old Joe hasn't fared so well with his share. He lost the hotel and saloon, and now he's down flat on his back with congestion of the lungs. The stable and corral are all he has left in the world."

"Too bad," was old Jim Carver's comment. "If he's able to make the trip, I'm willing to pay his fare to St. Louis. Maybe you'd buy out the corral and stable, Gaylord. It'll be a good business next spring, when Little Creek opens up again. We'll eat," he added briskly, "and then we'll go see Joe. I guess the old codger'll wish he'd taken a share of the claim."

Brother Van came bustling in at that moment, and exclaimed at the sight of the gold. Gaylord

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calmly introduced the four to Arlea and the little preacher.

“You’ll have company as far east as St. Louis, Miss Owen — when you go,” he dryly suggested. “That yellow pile, there, stands for all the luxuries four men can buy — when they get the gold and the luxuries within speaking distance of each other.” He slanted a keen glance at Arlea’s face, and saw the flush brought to her cheeks by hearing these men speak with such assurance of going back to civilization.

“Oh, I’m so glad you gentlemen mean to go at once!” she cried eagerly. “Every one has said Brother Van and I must not attempt to start, but now you are going, why ——”

Her voice dwindled and the flush of hope faded. How could she go? She had not a dollar in the world, since all her money had been burned in the hotel. Her eyes went from Jim Carver’s seamed but not unkindly face to the pile of gold on the counter. He was older than her father had been, and he was rich. He would lend her enough to take her away from here, and she would work and pay him back. She was strong. She would teach school — work in some rich woman’s kitchen — oh, anything!

“Now they’re here, why, they’ll likely stay awhile!” Andy Porter’s voice betrayed a certain

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malicious satisfaction in their plight. "That's a pile uh gold, all right — but it won't git nobody to Pioche till the road's opened up!"

"Maybe it'll help open up the road, though," Jim Carver retorted. "The snow is settling fast, to-day. You can lead an extra team or two behind the rig, to change off with the leaders, and we'll git through. We're willin' to pay any reasonable price, Andy."

"You'd better talk to Gawd about it. He's in charge uh the weather — unless Liz is right an' it's the devil's doin's. In which case," he grinned, "you kin go to the devil, Jim."

"Well, I thought mebbe one of his imps might serve the purpose," Jim Carver came back at him in a flash. "We're pretty well tuckered out, tramping up here and breakin' our own tracks, and we're ga'nt as hounds from working till our grub petered out. But we'll be ready to start by morning." He turned and looked at Arlea and the little preacher. "So if this young lady cares to avail herself of our escort, we'll be proud to have her and the minister go with us. If you can be ready on such short notice," he added doubtfully. "It may be a rough, uncomfortable trip, Miss Owen."

"No rougher or more uncomfortable than to stay here," she cried, with a look at the W Bar boys who stood back eyeing the gold much as a group of

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children would gaze upon the display window of a candy store. Looking at them (and hoping perhaps that her words would be repeated to young Lew Wheeler) she did not see how Burt Gaylord frowned and bit his underlip.

“Whisky Flat has given you the best it had, Miss Owen,” he said coldly. “I am sorry our hospitality has been so poor.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that!” Arlea’s face went hot at the rebuke. “You’ve all been wonderful to me and I am very, very grateful, but — Mr. Carver,” she cried, moving a step nearer, “I must tell you that I haven’t a penny in the world. Everything was lost when the hotel was burned down — and even that was my fault, because I ordered coals put in my room to take off the chill, and then I didn’t stay there to see that it was safe. A curtain must have blown across the kettle and caught fire. Lubelle said it must have happened that way. And now I can’t even nurse Kentucky Joe, and it was fighting the fire that made him catch that awful cold. Old Annie Green-Leaves won’t let me do a thing for Joe or even stay in there! And the widow Jensen can’t have me, because her place is so tiny there’s only room for one to turn around in her cabin, and Mrs. Porter has just the one little room, so I have to stay here, and sleep in the post-office with Lubelle; and that leaves Mr. Gaylord without

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a place —— Oh, it's so plain that I'm not needed, and I'm only in the way! Every one is so kind — but I don't want kindness! ” Her voice broke. “ I want to earn my way, and there isn't a thing I can do! I'd help with the mail, but there isn't any mail, I'd tend the store and be proud and glad to do it to pay for the food I eat, but how can I — when there aren't any customers? Mr. Gaylord and Mr. Wilbur won't let me turn my hand over to do a thing! ” She gave Burt a swift glance. “ I shall have to borrow money to get home on, but when I am there I can at least *work!* ” She laid a hand on Jim Carver's arm and her eyes were teary bright as she looked up at him. “ I'll pay back every cent, Mr. Carver. They treat me here as if — as if I were egg-shell china, and I'm not! I'm — I'm plain kitchen pewter and meant to be useful, if I only had a chance! ”

A fatherly impulse made Jim Carver lay his work-roughened hand over the girl's slim fingers where they lay on his sleeve. His eyes softened as he patted her hand.

“ Well, now, that's the stuff the good Lord sends out here to help build up the West,” he said indulgently. “ Kitchen pewter's hard to beat — but I guess it's solid silver doin' pewter work that we're talkin' about, young lady! Give it the chance, it'll stand more hard knocks and shine all the brighter

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for rubbin’ it rough. It’s settin’ up in the cupboard doin’ nothing, is what makes it dull. Numb-skulls! If I was goin’ to stay here, I’d put you up against any woman in the valley when it comes to cookin’ ! ”

“ I can cook — but no one will let me! ” Arlea complained, with a demure side-glance at Burt. “ Mr. Gaylord seems to think —— ”

“ Why don’t somebody show us a little cookin’? ” Hugh Whiting demanded. “ I could eat a raw dog! Here we’ve been goin’ on short rations for two weeks, and now we’ve got to stand around and listen to a lot of bragging —— ”

“ You have not! ” The laugh of Arlea made Burt Gaylord turn to look at her as if it had not occurred to him she could laugh like other girls. “ Now I have some one to take my part, I’ll show you how to make biscuits that will melt in your mouth! ”

“ Hold on a minute! ” Jim Carver felt he had an excuse to hold her hand a bit longer. “ You’ll want to get ready for the trip. We expect to start early — at daybreak.”

Arlea pulled her hand free and gave him a glance of pity.

“ Don’t you suppose I’ve been ready to leave at a minute’s notice ever since we came here? I just want to convince Mr. Gaylord that I can *cook!* ”

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She won another surprised look from Gaylord, who wondered why she should single him out for her reproach.

She was like another girl, now that she had a real tangible expectation of leaving the valley. Her biscuits were fluffy bits of perfection—or would have been if she had not forgotten the salt. Her laugh revealed unsuspected dimples and the W Bar boys forgot all about riding out to meet and warn young Lew—or to protect the Indians from Black Thunder, whichever point of view one cared to take. Salt or no salt, the biscuits vanished with amazing speed, as did the salt pork which Arlea rolled in yellow corn meal and fried a dainty brown.

Little Baldy it was who first dared call her Arlea to her face, in the friendly fashion of the West; and when she took no offense but instead began using their range nicknames as a matter of course, the boys all became emboldened to the point where they made frequent occasion for the use of her name.

“Why the sudden change?” Burt Gaylord asked her quietly when she stood close beside him after supper, pretending that she was not conscious of his presence but was watching the boys clear away the camp dishes. “Was it the pile of gold that melted that haughty manner, Miss Owen?”

Arlea turned and studied him, biting a corner of

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her lip and tilting her head to one side as if in deep consideration of the matter.

“No, Mr. Gaylord, it was not the gold,” she said calmly after a moment. “I think it’s the prospect of leaving a place where I know I’m not wanted.”

“No?” Gaylord’s eyebrows went up. “I thought it was the other way around, Miss Owen. I thought it was you who wanted nothing of Whisky Flat. At least that was my impression after listening to one or two speeches on the subject.”

She would have turned her back on him perhaps, but his eyes, blue and with a deep sparkle very like her own, compelled her to stay.

“Well, at least the feeling was mutual, Mr. Gaylord,” she retorted, breathing faster as she met his penetrating gaze. “You have resented my presence all along, and you haven’t taken much pains to hide your resentment. And since I happen to have heard your history, and how you yourself came to be here, I can’t believe that your intense loyalty to Whisky Flat makes you jealous of any word of criticism. I must take it for granted that you personally dislike to have me here. Well, you can’t possibly hate it as much as I do! I can laugh tonight because I know it’s the last night. And for that very reason I can’t understand why you should act so glum, and look daggers at me. Oh,” she added flippantly, “I admit I’m not the stuff from

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which your angelic pioneer women are made — and I'm proud of it! I have no ambition to be a — a Liz Porter, for instance! ”

“Nor even to be royal silver doing pewter work in a hut in the wilds of Nevada?” Eyes and tone mocked her, though more gently than had been his habit; as if he were teasing a spoiled child.

“No one wants me to be pewter, or anything else!” Arlea flashed angrily back at him. “All you want is to get rid of me as soon as possible! What do you care what I am — so long as you are not bothered with having me around?” A swish of her full brown skirt punctuated her departure, and that was the last word Burt Gaylord had with her that night.

But her voice, her indignant blue eyes, the adorable flush on her exquisite cheeks remained with him through the long hours when he lay in the dug-out behind the store. Jim Carver's heavy breathing filled the small space with a rhythmic whispery sound, as if the ghosts of memories were holding audible conclave in the blackness of the cellar; as if they were trying to make him understand something, force some truth through the wall of pride which Burt's bitter past had built around his heart.

“She wants to go — she hates the West — she'd hate me more for telling her ——” his pride reiterated stubbornly.

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“She hasn’t another soul in the world to look after her — she can’t go back and be dogged around working to keep a roof over her head — or maybe marry some skunk ——”

“She thinks her uncle’s dead, and it’s too late now to go back and do it over,” his pride contended. “You let her have the dead man’s belongings, — his money ——”

“The money’s burned and she hasn’t a cent,” that other part of him pressed home the nagging worry. “Would you send her out to fight for her life with her bare hands — you skunk?”

“She hoped she wouldn’t find her uncle — she’s happier, thinking him dead ——”

So they argued, round and round in the mental torture-cage where night prisons the sleepless. Burt Gaylord’s head ached with the warfare. His heart ached, his bones ached. That sparkly hour when Arlea’s real girlish self peeped out from behind her mask of discontent and lonely aloofness had played the very deuce with his judgment. He admitted it even while he fought against yielding to his awakened hunger for his own. No man may ever wholly sever the tie of blood that binds his soul to another. He may slash away at it, he may pull almost free, he may let the acid of hate eat into the bond. But so long as a fibre of his manhood remains, there, closely entwined and rooted so

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deep its very source is lost in the fertile subsoil of forgotten lives, he will one day find the bond of kinship.

Gaylord strove with all his spiritual might to break that tenuous bond — and when at last exhaustion of all his mental forces called a truce to argument, his slumber was so deep that it lasted well into the morning. When he went out into the mild sunshine of mid-forenoon, the refugees from the terrors of the wilderness were gone.

Indifferent with the apathy that follows futile effort, his reaction to their departure was a feeling of relief that was a balm to his battle-weary conscience. Fate had settled the matter for him, and Burt Gaylord told himself that Fate was wiser than he, and that the decision was right.

But then on the fourth day, just when he was thinking that the party must have reached Pioche by now, here they came trailing back exhausted, beaten and thankful for what poor shelter Whisky Flat could give. The Pass would take two months of hard digging to open so that teams could cross, they said. Six weeks for saddle horses.

So Fate, it seemed, was of the feminine sex — since she had changed her mind just when Burt Gaylord thought it was all settled. Whether he welcomed the responsibility or not, Arlea was back in Whisky Flat for the winter — and so was Brother

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Van, in spite of the fact that Burt hated preachers. So was the gold, and the four who reluctantly began to realize the fact that gold was no better than granite unless it could be spent!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SILVER DOES PEWTER WORK

“THERE’s your Christmas tree a-comin’,” Widow Jensen announced, pausing in the act of throwing out the dish-water upon the stained ice that sloped away from the soot-grimmed, soggy snowdrift piled against the back wall of the old assay office. (The silver was doing pewter work, according to old Jim Carver. Interpreting the metaphor, Arlea was installed as cook for the bachelors of camp, with the widow Jensen for chaperon and first assistant — lady-in-waiting to the dish-pan, as it were, while Lubelle visited at the Indian camp.) “Looks to me like one of the boys has got a deer,” she added, standing in a cloud of steam as the cold outer air rushed in to meet the warmth. “That’ll beat tryin’ to fix up hog meat so it’ll think itself roast goose! I don’t care how you cook it, it’s hog meat just the same, if you use all the sage stuffin’ in Christendom, Arlea. And it’s so sick of it I am that I’ll never look a pig in the eye again!”

“And you Irish! You’d better come in and shut the door, or you’ll be laid up again with rheumatism. And we can’t have that happen — not with all there is to do getting ready.”

Silver Does Pewter Work

"If Liz Porter had the gumption of a goose she'd be up here helpin'," grumbled the widow Jensen as she wiped out the dish-pan and hung it over a peg in the wall behind the door, spreading the cloth over it to dry. "It's a week now that she ain't stuck her nose outside the door. Is it the spell she's weavin', I dunno — like a spider in a web!"

"Oh, Liz is sulking because Brother Van told her she's following the arts of the devil, and she ought to burn that charm book for the good of the valley and the salvation of her soul. They had a terrible set-to in the store, and Liz won't come near. I thought you knew."

"And how should I know if nobody chooses to tell me?" the widow retorted. "With my legs that bad I can scarce move from table to stove, how should I be traipsin' to the store to hear all that's goin' on?"

"Liz says a curse is on the valley and she's been dreaming of birds of prey. And Brother Van says ——"

"It'll have to be the birds that pray, I'm thinkin', with you an' me an' the squaw goin' to meetin' an' the men toastin' their shins before the fire in the store as bold as brass! You cannot wonder that the preacher wishes to go an' preach to the Injuns that cannot understand him and so will maybe listen to what he's got to say!"

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"But they don't want him, either!" Arlea was pouring white beans from one palm into the other and winnowing out the dirt with her blown breath. "That's what Lubelle went down there for—to talk to the Indians and invite them up to our Christmas doings, and try and make them feel more friendly. We're going to make a lot of pop corn balls and taffy, and if we make them little and don't squeeze them down very hard, Mr. Gaylord thinks there'll be enough to go around, perhaps. They won't all come, of course. Some are too old and there are so many sick ones. Brother Van thinks we ought to save the pop corn balls for the Indians who aren't able to come up to the entertainment and have the taffy for the crowd here." She stopped to pick out a small stone from her cupped palm, and her brow wrinkled worriedly.

"It's going to be an awful job, Maria, even if the boys do help. And the molasses is getting down past the middle of the barrel. I had to lean 'way over to reach it, when I went to dip some out for the biscuits. It's too thick to run, so we have to dip it out. I've been thinking maybe we'd better not waste it in candy. Burt Gaylord doesn't think they can get the Pass opened up for another two months yet. They haven't much powder, and the rocks and dirt keep sliding down from above. And they say there never has been so much snow as this

Silver Does Pewter Work

winter." She dropped the beans into the large crock of clean water and looked wistfully toward the window.

"Maybe Liz is right and Brother Van is wrong," she said under her breath. "Maybe there is a curse on the valley. The Indians say there is — and they say it came when Black Thunder brought the storm."

"And if they wait long enough it's Black Thunder will likely bring the birds and the flowers back again to the valley — if he has such power!" the widow Jensen said shrewdly, going once more to stand peering out through the two-inch crack she held open in the doorway.

"Yes, they have a deer slung over the saddle of Lige Willard's horse," she confirmed her earlier guess. "A big one, with great branchin' horns I sh'd like to put on the wall and hang my shawl an' bunnet on. Little Baldy has the tree — but why they sh'd stop at the store and leave their poor horses stand shiverin' in the cold wind I dunno." She chuckled deep in her fat throat. "Laughin' Lew has some joke again. It's the jolly, fine young man he is with his merry ways and the twinkle in the big eyes of him. How they can call him Black Thunder and say he puts evil spells on the valley I dunno."

"Do please shut that door! My feet are like

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lumps of ice, with that freezing wind blowing across the floor. Do you suppose it's going to storm again?"

Arlea rose, washed the beans and set them on the fire in an iron kettle half filled with water which she dipped from a wooden bucket that held splinters of ice clinging to the edge.

"It would be just like it to start another blizzard and be storming great guns to-morrow," she said pettishly. "Maria, how would it be to mix the dried apples and currants this time? It would give a different flavor, and I haven't had the two together yet." She gave a little laugh that held much besides mirth. "First I had dried apples, then currants, then dried apples, then currants — just like the old clock on the stairs; only instead of 'Forever — never, never — forever,' I say, 'Dried apples — currants, currants — dried apples ——' But it's Christmas, so we'll wind the clock and give the pendulum a push and make it say, 'apples-'n'-currants — apples-'n'-currants ——' like that!"

"A great young one you are!" laughed the widow Jensen.

"And the beans I'm going to bake with plenty of molasses, this time, to make them nice and brown. And I suppose we ought to put some dried corn to soak — and Maria, did you ever hear of making cake and using snow in the place of eggs?"

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At the last minute you beat in a tablespoon (heaped up) of snow for each egg you'd like to use if you had them." She leaned against the table and stared thoughtfully out of the window, past which the snow was beginning to drive in little flurries. Across the valley the far mountains were an ominous shade of muddy purple, hinting at bad weather.

"I'm going to ask Jim Carver if he won't ask Mr. Gaylord for a can of jam," Arlea said after a moment. "I saw three cans back in a dark corner, and if I could have one I'd make a layer cake with the jam for jell — oh, Maria! If they have got a deer we can have mince pies! We have everything in the living world to do it with except the meat and suet, and I believe venison will do beautifully! Oh, you old fuss budget, we'll have a *real* Christmas! Cake and mince pie and pop corn balls and taffy, — oo-oh!"

She had her shawl over her head and was pulling open the door when little Baldy burst in, a cluster of gray-brown partridges with ruffled feathers clutched tight in one mittened hand.

Little Baldy's lips were parted in a smile, his breath made visible in little spurts of white steam. Arlea stepped backward to let him in.

"Merry Christmas is comin'," he cried joyously. "Look what Sandy Claws sent yuh, Arlea! Six

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grouse for Chris'mas dinner — and if the W Bar don't get invited, the cook shore is goin' to git her face washed in a snowdrift! ”

“ Why of course you're invited! We're going to have real mince pies, and roast partridge, and jelly cake — oh-h! ” In her exuberance she turned and flung her arms around the widow Jensen, hugging until that motherly person grunted.

“ Say! What you huggin' *her* for? She never brought no grouse! ” Baldy made indignant protest.

“ Maria can pass it on, then. ” Arlea laughed as she ducked away from Baldy's clutching fingers and retreated to the water bucket, where she threatened him with half a dipperful.

“ Now you *will* get your face washed! ” Baldy drew off his other mitten, pushed back the sleeves of his overcoat and made for her, his rush impeded by the bulky form of the widow Jensen who stepped into his path so that he was forced to straddle over the wood box.

Arlea darted past the widow and out into the shoveled path to the store, up the steps and through the door into the astonished embrace of young Lew Wheeler who was preparing to leave.

“ Baldy's after me! ” she gasped, in the dusky half-light thinking it was Lem Davis or Lige, and clinging to his fur coat sleeve. “ Baldy's going to

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wash my face with snow — oh, don't let him get me!" She squirmed around behind Lew as Baldy rushed in blinking a pair of determined eyes.

"Where's she at?" Baldy thundered fiercely, staring blind as a bat in the sudden transition from snow-glare to that gloomy interior. "She threwed water on me — and I'm goin' to take her out and polish her face till it shines like a new dollar! I heard 'er squeal — where's she at?"

"Who are you looking for? The squaw?" As Baldy went past him, Lew turned slowly so that his big body, bundled in his wolf-skin coat that reached to his ankles, hid the girl completely.

"Arlea. She run in here — I seen 'er." Baldy made for the back of the store where the boys were grouped before the fire warming chilled feet and fingers and telling the older men the story of the hunt.

"Slip out and run home. I'll see that he doesn't follow," Lew muttered over his shoulder.

Arlea's fingers loosened their clutching hold under his arms. She stepped away from him as if he had been some obnoxious animal, and her face hardened.

"Excuse me. I didn't know it was *you*," she said coldly and slipped outside.

Lew's lip lifted at the corner as he glanced after her. He had buttoned his coat and was pulling on his mittens when the boys came surging forward,

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following Baldy who still breathed threats as harmless as himself.

As they pushed past him Lew followed, going to where his big black horse was treading a restive half circle in the trampled snow about the long hitch rail. Lem Davis stopped and eyed him in surprise.

"Ain't you goin' to stay and help decorate the tree and pop the corn?" he called reproachfully. "They's a lot to be done around here, Lew, to git ready for the party."

"Far as I'm concerned, there won't be any party, Lem. You boys go ahead." Lew untied the black and made ready to mount.

"What you backing out of it for, Lew?" Lem moved perturbedly toward him.

"I'm not backing out of it. I never was in it," Lew said shortly.

"Ain't you even so much as comin' to the party to-morrow?" Lem stood helplessly watching Lew as he gathered up the reins and watched for the quiet moment when he could mount.

"Not if I know myself!" Lew was up and gone in a flurry of flung clods from the black's nimble feet while Lem stared after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHISKY FLAT KEEPS CHRISTMAS

A STORM of bitter wind, that gouged deep into drifts and hurled the scooped snow furiously forth to find new lodgment, was Nevada's Christmas greeting to Arlea. Whisky Flat was more friendly. With the connivance of the widow Jensen, Arlea's woolen stockings bulged with gifts that brought tears, laughter and little cries of delight as she turned them out on the bed.

The very first discovery, placed on top of everything else, was a little leather Testament from Brother Van, who had nothing to bestow save the word of God and counted that sufficient. On the flyleaf he had written:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them shall fall to the ground without your Father's notice. Fear not, therefore — ye are of more value than many sparrows.

God bless and keep you safe. Amen."

Arlea cried a little over that, and afterward tucked the book under her pillow. For although God seemed kinder lately, the girl's soul was still shrinking away from Him in dread of some fresh chastisement.

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Beneath the book was rolled a pair of blue mittens with long wristlet tops, knitted with the ornamental twisted stitch that reminded her poignantly of her mother's thin fingers clicking the needles just last Christmas time. The widow Jensen had knitted these in pain with her rheumatism, no doubt. Arlea cried again, pulled on the mittens and dug deeper. A beautifully braided, rawhide quirt and a bridle and reins to match, all tied in separate bundles — these had kept W Bar fingers busy on many an evening, she knew. A little chest of red cedar, polished and carved with her initials, "A.O.", in curly letters curiously entwined, must be what had made Kentucky Joe so secretively busy during his labored convalescence. She mentally promised him a kiss at breakfast time. Jim Wilbur gave her the arrow that to him at least commemorated her arrival in camp. His blood still darkened the flint, and she shivered and hid the grim token out of sight behind her box table.

Over the soft blue silk muffler still in the box that had protected it from the dust of the store, she puzzled for a moment, until the formal inscription on a card, "Christmas greetings to Miss Arlea Owen", convinced her that Burt Gaylord had after all softened a bit in his hidden dislike of her. She held the muffler against her cheek, shook it out at arm's length, brought it slowly closer until her face

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was buried in its soft folds. She looked at it, folded it with meticulous care, smoothed it with dainty fingertips. Why wouldn't this man be friendly with her like the others? Why did he dislike her, call her Miss Owen after nearly two months of three-times-a-day meeting at the table?

With a little flush in her cheeks she shook out the muffler again, folded it cornerwise and put it around her slim young throat. She would wear it to the party, she thought. It would be beautiful with the gray delaine that had been her mother's best dress. And perhaps — well perhaps Burt Gaylord would see that she appreciated his gift, and would look at her with a smile in his eyes, and call her Arlea as the others did.

Beaded moccasins from Lubelle, a real lace fichu from Captain Wheeler, who had no part in the feud between Arlea and his headstrong son, but was coming to the Christmas dinner with a bottle of wine he would swear was thirty years old. Milt Frisbee had pooled the Lucky Chance gifts and sent a bar of pure silver that must have weighed nearly a pound, she thought. Then, down in the toe — making it so heavy she had all along known what it must be — four little buckskin bags of nuggets culled for their size and beauty from the cleanup of the Little Creek mine. Enough to take her East again, yet not quite enough to make her feel it

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would be wrong to accept the gift — the tact of the Little Creek owners had held the leash upon their generosity, Arlea knew well.

In the very bottom, a little package gave her pause. Could it be possible that Lew Wheeler had sent her a gift? If he had she'd throw it in his face! All the others were accounted for — all save the Galloping Swede, who would never think of giving a Christmas present to any one, and Dutch Henry who wouldn't know enough, and Liz Porter who had warned her very earnestly against giving or receiving presents, since there was evil abroad in the valley and "spellbinding" might be expected from any quarter. She and Andy were therefore to be counted out. Arlea was thinking of that as she untied the white string around the box.

It was a thin gold chain, hand wrought and beautiful in itself, evidently intended originally for a man's watch chain. The locket attached to the larger link in the center had once been used as the charm, she had no doubt. A richly engraved gold it was, with a pearl in the center. To think that he would dare! Oh, it was beautiful, and if some one else had given it, — but never would she take a gift from Black Thunder, as Lubelle had accustomed her to hearing him called. The impertinence of sending her a gift of any kind — much less jewelry — when they were not even on friendly

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speaking terms! She knew Black Thunder must have sent it, for no one else would have been afraid to sign his name or give some indication of his identity. There wasn't a word; a gift that was in itself an affront, sent anonymously!

Well, she would send it right back to him, and she would not say a word, either! So she wrapped the trinket again in the paper, tied it with the same string, and with hot cheeks she wrote "Mr. Lewis Wheeler, Esq." on the wrapping. Baldy would take it to him without saying anything to the others. (Which Baldy did, when the time came, and suffered a jealous pang over the mission.)

Breakfast was late that morning, and the crude shanty that served as dining room was so cold that breaths steamed white over hearth-warmed plates, and bundled feet stamped under the table to keep the blood moving into chilled toes. But what of that? The coffee was extra strong, and there were hot corn bread and molasses, hot mince pie and fried-cakes, venison liver fried exactly right in pork "drippings" — let the wind howl around the corners and over the roof!

With a simple acceptance of her poverty that marked her for a thoroughbred, Arlea had displayed some ingenuity in her Christmas giving. No one guessed how long she had searched in the potato bin for the shapes she wanted for the dolls she had

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fashioned for Lubelle and the widow Jensen, with frilled dresses made from scraps of cloth found in her mother's trunk. The wristlets she had knitted for the W Bar boys — all save Laughing Lew! — were made from yarn that had been raveled from her father's socks. Days and days she had worked, to make so many! For Kentucky Joe she had crocheted a muffler of the same neutral gray, with stripes of blue. Ear muffs she had made for the older men, and not one had been forgotten. Then she had a pan full of bloated little men made of sweetened bread dough and fried in hot lard, with currant eyes and with arms and legs grotesquely distorted. One for each, kept for the tree.

Though she felt shy and awkward about giving it to him, she had hemstitched a handkerchief of fine linen for Burt Gaylord. Now that he had given her the blue silk muffler her courage rose stronger. She would slip the package in his coat pocket at breakfast time, however, instead of placing it boldly in the dish-pan which she put in the center of the table with the gifts for the others.

This would have been all very well if she had not been quite so hurried and afraid of detection. As it was she dared not do more than hesitate in the corner by the door where all the overcoats hung on pegs. She knew Burt Gaylord's unplucked beaver coat well enough — there was not another

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like it in camp—but in her haste she put the package in the wrong pocket; that of Kentucky Joe's coat which hung on the same peg.

Wherefore, Burt Gaylord got no Christmas present from Arlea—an omission that stabbed his pride and chilled his glance in spite of her shy flaunting of the blue, brocaded silk muffler.

Arlea got no smile, no softening of his formality, no bantering from his lips. His "Merry Christmas, Miss Owen", had crimped along her nerves to her very toes, and left a heavy feeling in her chest. Twice she had caught him looking at her throat, however, where the blue muffler was pinned like a fichu; he did notice that she wore it, then! But for some reason he did not look particularly pleased. While she laughed with the others and chattered of her gifts and her party, Arlea wondered if Burt Gaylord were not after all merely bashful and trying to hide his bashfulness under formality. Or perhaps he was naturally reserved.

When Kentucky Joe, hunting for his pipe, discovered the hemstitched handkerchief, he was so pathetically proud of the especial favor that she hadn't the heart to tell him it was a mistake. But tears of disappointment stung her eyelids whenever she thought of it.

But when six fat grouse and a haunch of venison must be roasted just so, and mince pies for fifteen

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men must be baked, and the multitude of last-minute little things must be attended to before three o'clock in the afternoon, the cook cannot indulge in much weeping over a gift gone astray. Arlea made bread-crumb dressing with sage and onion seasoning as her mother had taught her to do, and stuffed the six wild fowls that brought a gamy odor of the mountains to her nostrils as she bent over them. She rolled pie crust and made the pies, crimping the edges down with the imprint of fork tines in the dough, and managed the baking so that the small oven they had built for her did the work of one twice its size.

The wind was blowing a gale and had an icy sting by the time the W Bar boys with Captain Wheeler at their head came riding through the drifts, shapeless figures in their fur coats belted in at the waist and with caps pulled low. Arlea, hurrying the final preparations for the dinner and keeping an eye on the little window that commanded the trail up the bleak, level floor of the valley, saw them coming and cried out to Lubelle that it was time to mash the potatoes. Distracted as any other cook on Christmas day when the guests are arriving, she nevertheless took time to ascertain beyond all doubt that Black Thunder and his demon horse did not ride with the little cavalcade.

"I just knew he wouldn't dare show his face

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here!" she said to herself with such vicious emphasis that she must surely have meant it.

Perhaps the most noteworthy incident of that dinner — appetites being taken for granted — was the moment when Arlea, having seated every one elbow to elbow around the table, flushed, caught her breath, glanced swiftly at Burt Gaylord and then asked Brother Van to say grace. Heads ducked forward with surprised jerks while he prayed simply and briefly, with a quiet word to God about their isolated position cut off from the world as they were, and a little request that no one in that valley might hunger through the long winter.

Food for thought he gave them, now when they faced a feast for the body. For although no one had stressed the matter, every one knew that Antelope Valley had been caught unaware in the grip of winter. White men and Indians, they had not been prepared to be shut in for months with no hope of getting supplies. Andy Porter had counted on using freight teams instead of his one spring wagon, and putting on an extra driver or two, hauling the winter supplies to Whisky Flat. The Indians had meant to beg from the Overland Stage Company — or anybody who would help them through the long, cold months. As it was, lean weeks lay ahead of them all. Arlea's uneasy thought that perhaps she should not use the

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molasses for taffy recurred to her now as she glanced down the loaded table. Perhaps this Christmas feast was wrong ——

“No one’s going hungry to-day, anyhow,” Jim Carver observed meaningly and passed the white dome of mashed potatoes. “Nobody in the United States is facing a better dinner than this one right here. Preacher, the good Lord told us not to be anxious about to-morrow!”

“All that worries me,” said Captain Wheeler, a powerful, dark-eyed man who must have been another Laughing Lew in his youth, “is that I sha’n’t be able to save a place for that taffy and pop corn the boys have been talking so much about.”

“We’ve about decided to save the pop corn for the Indians,” Arlea said shyly. “They haven’t much to eat.”

“Seems to me they’ve been faring pretty well,” Captain Wheeler said grimly, helping himself generously to dressing. “They’ve been eating W Bar beef, from all the signs.”

“It is To-sarke and the young men who are his friends,” Lubelle forgot her reserve long enough to say firmly. “They do not like the white people. They say that your son has a bad spirit and brought the storm. They call him Black Thunder.”

“Well, I can’t say but what the name fits him sometimes,” Captain Wheeler laughed. “He rode

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home black enough yesterday — and I'm not sure but what he brought this storm!" He glanced up at Lubelle, who was filling the tin cups with coffee. "You tell your people Black Thunder is making medicine, and their camp will be buried in snow drifts as high as the tree tops if any more cattle is missing!"

"They are not my people," Lubelle calmly corrected him. "My people are far to the north of this place, by the swift river. But I tell them — if it is the truth."

"Got you that time, Cap'n," Jim Carver chuckled. "Say, is there a conspiracy to keep all the gravy down at that end of the table?"

"I claim the first dance with Ariea," Hugh Whiting shouted, complying with Carver's veiled request for gravy.

"Bring your fiddle, Cap'n?"

"Yes, and I expect to have to dance to my own music," Captain Wheeler retorted.

Came a moment when not a stomach there would hold another morsel, however tempting. Gorged, happily uncomfortable, the diners trooped out into the whistling gale. The devastated table was cleared and the dinner dishes hurriedly washed and stacked by three hilarious young men, while the store was hastily prepared for the party, barrels and boxes being piled along the walls, and the center

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swept. If it was the intention of the camp to make Arlea forget that she was a prisoner in the valley, that party was a success. Even Brother Van danced "Pop goes the weasel" with the rest of them, until drops of perspiration stood on his bald spot, and Arlea's sides ached from laughing at him.

When they were tired of that they boiled molasses in a copper kettle over the fire and had a candy pull; an uproarious affair that brought blanket-wrapped young Indians curiously peering in at the door and windows. Boys still in their teens, pulled thither in spite of the weather, these were. Urged by Jim Carver they came in and were given wads of the warm sticky stuff and told to pull it; which they did not do, but instead swallowed it avidly and held out slim, copper-brown hands for more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“SQUAWS HUNGRY, PAPOOSE HUNGRY ——”

No entertainment goes just as it has been planned. The tree was left leaning against the wall outside, because there had not been time for Arlea to invent decorations for it since she had at last decided upon mince pies. Put to a vote that afternoon, Whisky Flat was unanimous against any further labor on the part of their adored little cook; whereupon the doughnut men were distributed informally as an impromptu climax of the dinner, and Arlea drew a long breath of relief. She really could not see how she would have managed the tree, after so much cooking.

Neither were there any pop corn balls, for the same reason. Arlea had been too busy to superintend the popping of the corn, and the boys made a poor job of it. The result was a pan of scorched, half-opened kernels known as “old maids”, with a quart or two of scorched, popped corn on top. This was distributed among the Indians, who cupped their hands greedily to receive the treat; thus speedily disposing of the pop corn question.

The shrieks, protesting threats and wild laughter of the candy pull having subsided at last, the crowd sat around the replenished fire and listened

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to the old-timers, Jim Carver and Hugh Whiting, tell of the early days (which, looking back from '74, were indeed early!). Both had started west with a train of emigrants in 1850, and being in a discursive mood they told of Indian massacres that made Arlea shiver inside her warm shawl.

Kentucky Joe wheezed painfully through the long, detailed recital of a literally as well as figuratively hair-raising time when he rode for the Pony Express for a season, before he took to mining. The amazing picture of the obese, wheezing old man as a Pony Express rider impressed his hearers far more than did the adventure, and a good deal of elbow-jabbing and sly grins punctuated the story.

Into the bloodcurdling climax of the narrative stalked a snowy delegation of Indians, To-sarke in a dingy red blanket heading the group.

Jim Carver, knowing Indians of old, rose and took a step forward to meet these fresh visitors, the boys having slipped away when no more candy was forthcoming. Arlea, wide-eyed and apprehensive, moved closer to Captain Wheeler and did not object when the old man slid an arm around her slim waist.

The dialogue was in Shoshone, and it was brief. Carver ended it by waving his hand toward the door.

"No! All gone," he said in English.

"They come trailin' up here after some taffy,"

“Squaws Hungry, Papoose Hungry”

he explained to the others. “Boys told ’em how we been forking out the candy, I s’pose. To-sarke seems to think he’s got some comin’ to him.”

“To-sarke’s the one that’s been stealing our cattle, isn’t he?” Captain Wheeler gently released Arlea and arose. “I’ll just deliver that message myself,” he added. Which, in mixed Indian and English, he proceeded to do.

“Squaws hungry, papoose hungry, all Injuns heap damn hungry,” To-sarke grunted in reply. “No ketchum cow. Ketchum deer.”

He grunted to his followers, stared at the crowd around the fireplace that stared back at him, hitched up his blanket, turned and padded out, his followers at his heels.

“Mad,” Jim Carver succinctly diagnosed. “Wish we’d kept them whippersnappers outa here, and not fed ’em good taffy. Now the whole kaboodle will start in beggin’ off us. And far as I can see, we can’t afford to feed a whole Injun camp off what we’ve got to winter on. How you fixed down at the Lucky, Milt?”

“All right — if we was headin’ into spring instead of winter,” Milt Frisbee answered gravely. “There’s seven of us down there, and we’ve opened our last barrel of flour. Got a hundred pounds of corn meal, but it got wet when the big storm hit us, and part of it’s musty. Beans enough, and we

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can stretch the sowbelly out, if we can git meat in the hills. Few little nicknacks — not much. Coffee's about gone. I was plannin' on gittin' the winter's grub soon as Andy brought in a freight load."

"Well," Andy Porter explained defensively — he having left Liz to sulk alone while he joined the merry-makers — "Joe had a bill uh horse feed he wanted hauled, and I needed feed, so I made a load of it — grain, mostly. Next load would have been supplies for the store. I planned to mix my load, just in case of a storm. Caught me jest about a week too soon, that's what." In the firelight his eyes were seen turning anxiously from face to face. "Horses have got to eat, though, same as humans. I don't see but what I done the right thing," he said. "We was about out of horse feed. I turned all but my best team out to rustle," he added, and heaved a sigh. "Kinda tough — but we couldn't winter 'em any other way."

"You did the right thing, Andy, first and last," Burt Gaylord told him quietly. "We talked that over, and I advised you to haul a load of feed before you started in for the store. We weren't out of anything — we aren't yet, for that matter." He looked across at Captain Wheeler, who was patting Arlea's hand as if she were a small, frightened child who must be reassured. "How are you fixed over at your place, Captain?"

“Squaws Hungry, Papoose Hungry”

“We can winter,” the old man stated cheerfully. “May come out spring poor, but we’ll pick up flesh soon as the new feed comes on.” He chuckled over the whimsicality and immediately turned serious again. “The outfit brought in grub with the cattle — not much, but a barrel of pork and considerable flour and coffee. We’re out of sugar, but we can get along. I didn’t know how you were fixed, over here — and it’ll do the boys good to rough it.” He slanted a keen look at them from under his bushy eyebrows. “Young whelps won’t need any sweet’nin’ for six months, after the way they gorged to-day,” he bantered.

Arlea caught her breath and whispered in the ear of Little Baldy, who sat on the other side of her.

“That reminds me — there’s a whole pie, and a dough man, and — and some taffy you must take home with you. Perhaps — some one might enjoy ——”

“Uh-huh,” Baldy whispered back. “I didn’t eat none of my candy — hardly. Gits in my teeth. I’m savin’ it for Lew.” He waited a minute, then leaned and whispered what had been a great mystery to them all. “Say, Arlea, what you two mad at each other about?”

“Why, nothing that I know of,” Arlea whispered back, though her face felt suddenly hot. “Did he say he was mad at me?”

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"Actions speaks louder than words," Baldy whispered sententiously, and would say no more.

The talk swung to ways and means, and a rough inventory of the valley's food supply was made. Fortunately all the loose prospectors in the surrounding hills had wandered south with the other migratory birds, Pioche blazing before their imaginations as a carnival of free drinks and smokes and much excitement during the month preceding election. They would not return until warm weather, which lessened the number to be fed. The W Bar camp (it could scarcely be called a ranch in its present untamed state) across the creek and farther up the valley; Lucky Chance mine in a canyon to the north and Whisky Flat itself being the only white settlements.

The W Bar riders would have enough to do, herding the cattle away from the lower end of the valley where it was certain the Shoshones were taking stealthy toll, and guarding against raids wherever the cattle might graze, but the other men would hunt game to supply the three camps with meat. Rations would be divided — Arlea was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief when she heard Gaylord say that the W Bar camp would have its share of sugar.

"Might as well pack over some horse feed, too," Andy Porter proposed. "We couldn't let the horses

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in this camp eat their heads off this winter—nothin’ for ’em to do except haulin’ men down to the Pass and haulin’ ’em back agin. But your horses has to be kep’ in shape for steady ridin’; might trade yuh a few sacks of grain for a beef,” he added.

“We won’t suffer for meat,” Captain Wheeler declared, “though we brought in she-stock mostly, and left the beef cattle down on the home ranch. We’ll beef a cow any time you say the word, however. Nobody’s going hungry while there’s a hoof left in the valley.”

Brother Van had been silent, sitting hunched forward on a box before the fire, his hands clasped between his knees and his eyes staring wistfully into the flames. Now he stirred uneasily and looked up.

“Those poor, savage heathens in the village,” he said, “what of them? There is already some sickness among them, and food is scarce. The other day I rode down there, and I was appalled at the poor shelters they had. I feel that God looks to us to care for those poor souls. And we surely owe a great deal to the old squaw who nursed one of our number back from the brink of death.” He glanced toward Kentucky Joe, who squirmed uneasily.

“I am not rich in worldly goods,” Brother Van continued in his melodious pulpit voice, “and I

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do not know how much an animal is worth for beef. But I am going to start a subscription here to purchase sufficient beef to keep the Indians in the village from actual want until such time as they can leave the valley in search of livelihood elsewhere. I shall start it off myself with fifty dollars."

Whereupon he pulled his wallet from an inside pocket, rolled off the band with his thumb and methodically counted out the sum he had named, and laid the banknotes in the pan that had held pop corn. They could not help seeing how pitifully thin was that wallet as he slipped it back into his pocket. He gave a smiling, expectant look around and handed the pan to Arlea.

"My friends, the Lord loveth a cheerful giver. Give according to the dictates of your heart, and God bless you and lead you aright. Arlea will pass among you and receive the offering. And as you give, so shall ye receive."

"My heart leads me to say the lazy hounds should be made to git out in the hills and hunt," grumbled Captain Wheeler, but he wrote "two three-year-olds" on a leaf from his pocket notebook and tore out the leaf to drop it upon the preacher's money. "Seems like I've already donated about four critters to the cause, maybe more," he observed dryly as he watched the pan hesitate before Lige and Lem.

“Squaws Hungry, Papoose Hungry”

“We’ll contribute our labor of seein’ they don’t steal their own cattle,” drawled Lem. “I don’t know what money looks like, no more!”

None of the cowboys were expected to give money, it seemed, and in their poverty they kept Arlea’s pride cheerful company. But the others gave rather generously, chiefly because that shrewd little shepherd of souls, Brother Van, had cannily set them an example which they must follow or feel themselves shamed for their meanness.

“You’re establishin’ a dangerous precedent,” Dolf Norton warned them, rousing from his sulky silence at being thwarted in his desire to roll in luxury in St. Louis and points East. Once upon a time Dolf had studied law and his legal decisions were the only thing he never grudged giving away. For the first time in the history of Whisky Flat every man present, save only the preacher, agreed with him.

Arlea had made the rounds and was counting the money for the fifth time and bargaining like any old woman at market, to buy as many cattle as possible, when the door flung open and Laughing Lew burst in among them, his eyes ablaze with the rage he was in.

“Get your guns and all the shells you can carry, and come on!” he shouted hoarsely. “The Injuns have got your saddle horses, boys. They ran them down to camp, and — *they’re eating them!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“PRAY — THEY'RE GOIN' TO NEED IT!”

THE monstrous fact froze thought and speech, and for several seconds no one moved. The W Bar men launched themselves toward the door, in their throats that inarticulate sound which one sometimes hears from a mob in killing mood. Little Baldy in passing dashed the money pan from Arlea's hands, and the glaze of insensate rage was in his eyes as he snarled with lifted lip and went on.

Arlea shrank back. She did not know these frenzied men who lunged past her, horror in their eyes and with their lips drawn away from bared teeth that gnashed like beasts at the kill. Where were the smiling, soft-voiced young fellows of a moment ago? Those happy-go-lucky, gallant friends, royal companions in exile?

She glanced wildly at Brother Van and saw him standing where he had risen to plead for help to feed the very Indians who had committed this incredible outrage. Brother Van's eyes were closed, his clasped hands were uplifted and his lips, gone suddenly thin and bloodless, moved stiffly in unheard prayer.

The full import of the horror broke upon her

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when she saw the tears streaming down Little Baldy’s boyish cheeks as he tore past her again, going back for his cap.

“Crowhopper dead—the damned cannibals!” he cried brokenly, not even knowing that he spoke, and elbowed Brother Van rudely to one side.

“Yeah—*pray!*” he shrieked, pausing to glare. “Pray for them you was so damn anxious to feed! *Pray* for the lousy Injuns! They’re goin’ to need it!”

He did not know that Arlea found his cap and put it into his hands nor did the girl herself realize what she was doing. It was the purely feminine instinct to wait on her men folk that impelled the service. Little Baldy rushed off, mouthing oaths to blister the tongue that uttered them. Crowhopper was a Roman-nosed, mean-eyed buckskin with a tricky temper, but Little Baldy loved him. How well, only a born horseman can understand.

“I didn’t have any shells with me,” Laughing Lew, all the laughter gone from his eyes and his voice, was explaining rapidly by the door. “I was uneasy and restless, for some reason, so I saddled Selim and struck out to ride line and see if the cattle were drifting down the valley. I ran across a couple of wolves that had hamstrung a yearling, and I emptied my gun at them—got ’em both. That took me down toward the Injun camp—the

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wolves ran that way. Heard a great ki-yi-ing down in the brush by the creek, so I got off my horse and sneaked to the edge of the bluff. The feast had just begun."

He stopped and gave his head an impatient shake, as if he were trying to rid himself of a nightmare.

"Four fires going — and they were skinning Deacon's little bay and Baldy's ——"

"My God, lemme out of here!" Little Baldy clawed to reach the door.

"Steady, boys!" Captain Wheeler shouldered to the door and faced them, his eyes blazing, very like his son's. "Don't go off half-cocked, or you'll be whipped before you start. Shotguns, boys, — all Burt can give us. Shotguns, and revolvers for close quarters. We can't save the horses, so take your time and make sure you're ready before you start. Lew, you say they were off away from the main camp?" He turned sharply and his dark eyes stabbed at his son.

"A good mile this side. Bunch of bucks — thirty or forty. I didn't count. I was so damned mad to think I'd shot away my shells at — at *wolves!*" Laughing Lew's voice broke. "And those — *ghouls* ——"

"We'll get 'em," Captain Wheeler snapped. "They'll gorge themselves —— It's To-sarke's

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bunch. The chief wouldn’t allow a thing like that. Andy, you’ve got a couple of horses up, you said?”

“Hell, I dunno, Cap’n! I’ll go see if they took ’em.” He edged out and they heard his warm boot soles squeaking in the snow as he ran down the trodden path to his stable.

Burt Gaylord came hurrying forward, several guns in his hands. Behind him Milt Frisbee, Jim Wilbur and the other Lucky Chance men crowded close, pulling down caps over their ears. Hugh Whiting dumped an armful of small boxes on the counter.

“Here you are, boys. We’re goin’ along, and if we don’t make that bunch sweat blood it’ll be funny. S’pose we’ll have to walk—or do you expect Andy to sled us down close as we dare?”

“It isn’t so far if you cut straight across and don’t follow the road,” Lew told them. “I broke trail, coming over, and dad can get on Selim and do the same going back. I’ll walk. They’re keeping an eye on the trail, I could see that. Probably figure you’ll track the horses soon as you miss them. They’re down by the creek, right at the foot of that long hill, in that little flat where they’re sheltered from the wind. They got your coats, didn’t they? Used them to blanket your horses, of course! I saw a buck wearing Baldy’s coonskin.”

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At this Baldy resumed his cursing, snatched a gun and a box of shells and yanked the door open. The rest followed him, jostling a bit in the doorway.

When they were gone, Arlea went to the door, pulled it open and looked out. The stars sparkled in a purple sky, the wind had dropped to a stealthy breeze that nipped viciously at her nose and cheeks. She shivered, and shut the door, turning back to where the widow Jensen stood staring confusedly about her. Brother Van had dropped to his knees and was praying with pale face tilted so that the firelight gave it an oddly ruddy glow. Kentucky Joe, helpless and wheezing with excitement, was swearing softly to himself.

"Hell to pay from now on," he gasped, and sucked in a labored breath. "Start an Injun war — that's what they'll do! And us bottled up in the valley like calves shut in a pen! "

"They promised me they wouldn't ——" Arlea began, but stopped as if a hand had been clapped over her mouth. What were promises worth now? She covered her eyes with both palms as Little Baldy's face flashed before her. No promise on earth could hold Baldy back; he would avenge Crowhopper or give his own life — and so would the others, unless ——

She turned to where Lubelle had been sitting, back in the shadow away from the firelight. The

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squaw was gone, and Arlea knew that she must have left before Lew came with his terrible news. She was afraid to go across the road looking for Lubelle; afraid of the dark and what would presently take place down there by the creek. Nor did she see how Lubelle could help, unless she brought the chief to the scene, and that might only make matters worse. Sinking limply down on a pile of blankets that served as beds for several of the men, she clasped her hands tightly before her and stared into the shadows, seeing nothing save what her imagination conjured.

“ Might as well eat Baldy — as to eat ole Crow-hopper,” Joe mumbled lugubriously. “ A cowboy thinks more of his horse than what he would think of a wife if he had one. Hell to pay an’ no pitch hot! ” So he rumbled a wheezing accompaniment to Brother Van’s half audible prayers and the widow Jensen’s truly Irish complaining that she must be kept from her bed till the Injuns came and scalped her in cold blood.

Arlea heard none of it. She was seeing that fight at the river, waiting to know for a certainty the direful outcome. Only once did she speak during those interminable hours.

“ Liz Porter has been dreaming about birds of prey,” she muttered. “ Is this what she meant, I wonder? ”

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Joe canted one red-lidded eye toward her, but no one replied.

Dawn came, and with it the screech of frosty snow under tramping boot soles. The footsteps sounded dragging, heavy, as if the feet were none too eager to return. Arlea's heart leaped to her throat and pounded suffocatingly there as she flew to the door and pulled it open, the frosty latch sticking to her fingers.

Young Lew came in first, half carrying another. Lew's face was blood streaked, but his movements were virile, sure. Arlea sprang to the side of the wounded man and saw he was Jim Carver, panting as noisily almost as Kentucky Joe. Without a word she helped Lew get him to the fire, which Brother Van had tended during the night.

Others were coming in, looking worn out and gloomy. Jim Wilbur, Milt Frisbee and Lem Davis bore a limp form between them, "Long John" Woods, whose face was pasty white above his beard.

"He's breathing his last now," Lem Davis muttered to his companions as they laid John down on the blankets where Arlea had spent that awful night.

Laughing Lew eased Carver to a home-made chair and knelt beside Long John, who looked very long indeed with his legs stretched slackly on the floor. Lew pulled off his mittens and John's fur cap, and laid his fingers against the dying man's forehead.

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Burt Gaylord came up and stood looking down at them with sombre attention.

“Two gone,” he said tonelessly, and turned away to minister to Carver. Then suddenly he stood up, sniffed the air and looked at Arlea standing timidly beyond the fireplace. As if he had beckoned her she came forward.

“I made some coffee,” she said in a pinched voice, “and Brother Van brought over the fried-cakes and all the bread and meat. I—I thought you’d all—be hungry.”

“Have you got cups? Carver, here, needs something to brace him up. And give the boys some. Lew carried ——”

“He’s gone!” Laughing Lew said brokenly, and stood up, his face working strangely. “Carry him up front, some of you—lay him on the counter by the door and cover him ——” He turned away and laid an arm along the crude, stone mantel, dropping his face down upon it so that it was hidden from sight. His big body trembled noticeably. Arlea, staring with wide, horrified eyes, felt that he was weeping. And yet Long John Woods had not been any great favorite with the outfit; an unkempt, unlettered man whose consciousness of his own inferiority held him pretty much in the background. A good rider, they said, “strong in the back and weak in the head.” Well, he was perhaps wiser

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now than any there. And Laughing Lew wept for him. To Arlea that circumstance came as a great shock. The picture of her rollicking young feudist standing with his face hidden on his arm and his broad shoulders moving convulsively would haunt her long, she knew.

Captain Wheeler had gone home with Hugh Whiting, Lige Willard, Little Baldy and the Deacon, after more horses and to set a guard over the W Bar camp. What would be the outcome no one could guess. A man from the Lucky Chance was dead and lying on the porch, but Arlea did not know that until afterward; nor, until she missed him and Pete Jergensen from among the others and asked about him, did any one tell her that Andy Porter had an arm broken by a bullet.

Dumb with the horror of it all, she and Brother Van passed fried-cakes and coffee, and made thick sandwiches of cold roast venison and bread.

The widow Jensen, her big wool shawl wrapped close around head and shoulders, went down to see if Liz needed any help — or so she said; secretly to make sure that Andy had more help than some outlandish charm from the black book, such as drawing a string three times around the wound and afterward placing the string under the east corner of the house, with proper incantations. Liz had used that remedy when the widow Jensen cut her foot with

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the axe while chopping the scraggy branches off a sage bush, and the charm had been a flat failure. The widow Jensen had her own private beliefs concerning ghosts, banshees and such, but she did not propose to let Liz Porter fool with a man’s good fighting arm while affairs in the valley were at this critical stage.

Not even Kentucky Joe dared ask for the details of that fight down in the thicket by the creek. That the Indians had escaped unscratched not even Arlea could believe. Later, when all save Hugh Whiting and the Deacon had ridden over from the W Bar with led horses behind them, Brother Van conducted funeral services for two, there in the store. Dutch Henry and the Galloping Swede were there, though the Swede left soon after to spy on the Indian village and report any active demonstration against the settlement. With his long, shambling trot that could outdistance the average horse in a twenty-four hour journey, the Swede’s legs became of vast importance to his fellows.

Heavy eyed and heavy hearted, Arlea set about cooking a real meal for the men, though she knew that no one was in the mood for eating. It was for that very reason that she baked fresh pies, made two great pans of yellow corn bread, added an extra cup of coffee to the great hotel coffee boiler that had been saved from the fire along with most of

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the other kitchen utensils and food; by the cool-thinking wisdom of Laughing Lew, she was bound to admit.

Baldy and Lem Davis had volunteered to help with the dinner — probably to escape from their own bitterness. It was Little Baldy, seeking the relief of speech, who told her the story she wanted yet dreaded to hear.

“We didn’t come out so good — but the Injuns is a heap worse off than what we are,” he boasted sombrely. “I betcha they’re yelpin’ good and plenty, t’-day! We got at least a dozen, didn’t we, Lem?”

“More, I guess, when Black Thunder lammed into the middle of ’em,” Lem attested, looking up from gouging the dry-rot out of the potatoes he was preparing to boil.

“B-black Thunder?” Arlea turned away, fumbling on a shelf in the corner for something she did not need.

“Shore. We was sneakin’ around ’em, but a pack of dogs had come out from camp — smelled fresh meat, I guess. They got wind of us and set up a holler, and the dev — the Injuns opened fire on us. Funny — everybody kinda s’posed they didn’t have much left to fight with, after that big burnin’ that took place just before we landed here. But Tosarke’s bunch shore is well heeled. Looks to me like

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they held out on old Sho-kup, or whatever his name was.”

“They opened up on us about the same time we cut loose,” Lem helped the story along.

“Yeah — that’s when they musta got John. But them few shotguns Burt give us shore done the business!” Baldy’s voice expressed keen satisfaction. “We had ’em floppin’ around in the snow like wung ducks. They scooted into the brushes and hid, though, and we fit back an’ forth for quite awhile, an’ Bob Reeve was shot down off’n the ledge, and Jim Carver got hit an’ so did Andy.

“We’d been fightin’ yet if Lew hadn’t took a holt,” Lem interpolated.

“Yeah — Lew remembered it was To-sarke that had first started the story around about him bein’ a devil. He goes back where Selim was tied in the bush, takes off his fur coat and throws it over Long John, mounts and sneaks down around the other way and works up on ’em from the road. They never seen him till he was right on top of ’em, and he let out a yelp like a wolf and comes leapin’ down a little hill right into the middle of ’em.”

“Did look kinda creepy, comin’ outa the dark like that,” Lem cut in.

“Yeah — like the part in a stage play that lifts yuh off’n the chair,” Baldy agreed. “Yuh know, Selim was stole by Injuns when he was a colt, oncet,

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and they like to ruined him 'fore Lew got 'im back. He shore hates the sight an' smell of one! He come down that slope a tearin', and his mouth was wide open and his eyes bugged out till — well, I'd uh turned tail m'self, if he'd come at me sudden like that! And ——”

“I seen him set his jaws into one buck that I'm shore of,” said Lem.

“Yeah, and he tromped another one,” Baldy cried gloatingly. “And he scared the livin' tar outa the rest. Lew chased 'em clean down to their camp, almost, 'fore he could pull Selim in.”

“He — his cheek was cut ——” Arlea said faintly, stooping to look into the oven.

“Yeah — done that in the brush.”

“And did you — save any of the horses?”

Baldy and Lem glanced at each other, and Baldy shook his head and swallowed an invisible lump in his throat.

“Nh-nh. But they didn't gain nothin'. We broke a hole in the ice and throwed the carcasses in, and the hides. And we got our saddles back and our coats — but some of us boys had went and left our rifles on the saddles and them was gone. But ——”

“It was awful, of course, to lose the horses that way,” Arlea observed, passing judgment after the manner of women. “But I can't see that you were

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justified in going down there and getting two men killed—*nothing* can justify the willful endangering of life. I ——”

“I s’pose you advised Dolf Norton to go hide in the cellar when we started out!” Lem broke in hotly.

“I s’pose you respect that white-livered ——”

“You promised me you wouldn’t molest those Indians and stir up ill feeling,” Arlea countered stubbornly, her nerves keyed to that stage of tension where recrimination becomes instinctive.

“*Molest ’em?*” Little Baldy’s jaw hardened. “They molested *us*, didn’t they? Hell, you never can talk sense to a woman!”

Whereupon the two stalked off, and it was a red-eyed girl with trembling lips who poured coffee for a group of morose, silent men, who ate with little relish, not because they wanted to but because they must stoke their bodies with food or feel muscles grow weak.

A miserable meal, tragically unlike that jubilant feast at that same table just twenty-four hours before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“ IS BLACK THUNDER THEN A SPIRIT? ”

“ WE *couldn't!* ” Captain Wheeler, having commanded the party that administered what he stiffly called reprisals, was impatiently defending himself against the veiled reproaches of the pacifists — usually the minority party in any community and consisting now of Arlea and Brother Van; the widow Jensen being anxious only to feel her hair safe, and Dolf Norton having little to say except that he didn't see why he should wade a mile through snow to fight over a dead horse.

“ Let them go unpunished for a deed like that, and we'd all be murdered in our beds before the winter's over. They'd attack the camp, here, for sake of looting the supplies. I've handled Indians before. You can't turn the other cheek to an Injun, or he'll take your scalp also. Remember that, Parson, and next time you get down on your knees to pray let your prayers be for hard hitting and straight shooting! ”

“ Oh, you aren't going to fight them again, are you, Captain? ”

Arlea was pale and hollow-eyed, longing for the monotony that had irked her so when she had

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not yet learned to prize the uneventfulness of peace.

Captain Wheeler regarded her thoughtfully for a space, his only reply a gentle patting of her shoulder. He looked across at Burt Gaylord, their eyes meeting for a brief interchange of unspoken thoughts.

“Lots of folks would try to hide everything from the women,” the captain remarked to the crowd. “I never beat around the bush with Lew’s mother—she stood right alongside me and loaded one gun while I fired the other, time of the Sioux uprising in Minnesota. Wouldn’t have any respect for a woman that had to be lied to and treated as if she was a child or an idiot.” He turned to Arlea and absently smoothed down a lock of hair blown loose.

“This young lady ain’t either a child or a fool,” he announced in his sharp tone of authority. “Let her learn how to handle a gun, if she don’t know. She may not have to fight, but there ain’t a reason in the world why she shouldn’t know how! Whisky Flat can’t be pestered with fainting, cowering females—Madam, can you shoot?” With a sharp glance he discharged the question straight at the widow Jensen.

“Sure, if you’ve any doubt of it, Captain Wheeler, I’d advise ye to stand off foreninst me when my temper’s up, an’ let me blaze away at ye once!”

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The laugh was on the captain, and he took it with a lift of his bushy eyebrows and a puckered mouth under his big, gray mustache.

"I think the ladies are capable of taking their own part in any argument that may arise," Burt Gaylord said dryly. "The widow can handle a shotgun with any man here, and Liz Porter will fight like a panther if she's cornered. I think we may safely assume that Miss Owen would show the same intrepid spirit in war that she has shown in peace!" His tone, tinged lightly with irony, made Arlea remember certain wordy encounters that struck her now as being shrewish and puerile.

"I suppose I could shoot off a gun," she said dubiously, "if it was to save life. What I don't approve of is all this fighting and killing because you're mad at them. It has cost lives already, and it will cost more." She saw the hardening eyes turned upon her and bit her lip. "All I want is for you to avoid all the trouble you can — and I want to leave this horrible place!" Her old childish resentment against circumstances flashed out in that last sentence.

"I think we'd all welcome green grass and running brooks and the happy song of birds nesting among new leaves." Laughing Lew did not look at Arlea, lifting an eyebrow at Little Baldy instead. But the girl gave him a murderous glance,

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turned squarely away from him and spoke to Captain Wheeler.

“I’ve just decided that it would be a great advantage to know how to shoot a gun,” she said coldly.

“One thing has got to be done right now,” said Milt Frisbee, too full of the one important subject to do other than ignore the acrimonious repartee of the young folks. “That’s to go down and have a powwow with Que-ta-pat-so. He’ll get To-sarke’s story of the fight, and it won’t be straight, you can bet on that. Burt, they look on you as the chief here because you have the post-office. Want to go along?”

“I consider that it’s my place to go,” said Captain Wheeler when he saw Burt reaching for his fur coat. “They stole our horses, remember.”

“And that’s one reason why you’d better keep out,” Milt told him. “It was kind of a hot-headed thing we done last night, though I expect we’d do the same thing again. You can’t pass over a thing like that without a word, or they’d think we’re afraid of them and be up here full of fight. Well, you lost a man and so did I. You’ve got your cattle to watch and you’ve had twenty-four hours without no rest. Place for you is bed. Burt and me is known to them bucks and we can talk turkey to them. Too many of us go, it’ll look again like

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we're afraid of losing our hair. Cap'n, you go on to bed."

Captain Wheeler was inclined to argue the point, but they talked him down and started out on borrowed horses, wishing the sun was higher but knowing better than to postpone the visit until another day. How many of the raiding party had fallen in the fight they could only guess, but it was vital that Que-ta-pat-so should learn the truth soon. They had no mind to sit quietly by the fire and await results; the thing to do was exactly what they were doing.

"It ain't as if we could send out after help," Milt pointed out as they rode along, though Gaylord needed no information on the subject. "We've got our hands full without fightin' Injuns all winter. Burt, what I'd like to do is either move Whisky Flat down to the Pass or move the Pass up to Camp. Has it struck you yet that it's goin' to be the devil's own job, keepin' up that camp at the Pass if the Injuns want to make us trouble? Hell, I was hot enough last night — but I see now what we oughta done."

"Yes, we ought to have gone straight to Que-ta-pat-so, instead of stampeding into a battle. We'd have saved a couple of lives, to say nothing of Carver and Andy being hurt. But it's too late now."

"Yeah — it's too late now. I guess it wasn't the

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stealin' so much, Burt, if they hadn't *et* 'em. The boys thought a lot of their horses. Well, hindsight is better than foresight — and here comes a delegation from camp, to prove it. I'm shore glad we started, anyhow. Looks better. Well, we got some friends in camp — old Annie, and then Waunona'll likely have somethin' to say — ain't that the new chief? I b'lieve it is.”

“Shall we wait here?” Gaylord slowed his horse.

“No, ride on, Burt. No backin' up at this stage. We ride to meet 'em like as if we know damn well it's all right. Give an inch and you'll have to give the hull trail.”

They rode on, their shadows going before them and touching the Indian ponies before either party pulled up. Que-ta-pat-so halted first, but he did not yield the trail. He waited, cowed in his blanket, and beside him rode a foxy-eyed old half-breed called Beans Tom. Willwoll Pushback was another breed, Dick Pitch was a flat-faced full blood and Buffalo Jim an old friend of the late lamented Sho-kup. Milt Frisbee cast appraising glances over the group before he lifted his hand in the salute of peace, Burt Gaylord following his example.

Que-ta-pat-so's hand went up perfunctorily in response, and for a moment no one spoke. Again it was Milt who was forced to take the initiative —

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an unfavorable sign, Burt thought to himself. Que-ta-pat-so was usually rather effusively friendly, or as nearly so as an Indian ever gets.

"We go to your camp — you come to our camp. Where we go now?" Milt spoke in choppy English, hoping to confine the talk where Burt could understand everything that went on.

"No mattah. Mebby-so we go yoh camp," Que-ta-pat-so grunted. "Mebby-so yoh heap 'fraid come Injun camp. Me no 'fraid come yoh camp."

"Our camp close by," said Milt calmly, and turned his horse in the snow, swinging toward Burt and giving him a significant glance.

In his heart he was glad that Whisky Flat lay no more than half a mile behind them, so that to return seemed the most natural thing in the world. Not that Milt was scared; he wanted old Jim Carver and Captain Wheeler in on this particular pow-wow, which was going to require careful handling. Moreover, it was late in the day to be calling on a hundred or more Indians mostly hostile — not including the squaws and papooses.

The two rode a few paces in advance of the Indians, Que-ta-pat-so riding alone at the head of the four. The trail having been broken through the snow by Andy Porter's team and a crude, home-made sleigh called a pung, two horsemen only could ride side by side. There was no especial significance

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therefore in the fact that Que-ta-pat-so rode alone and not with his white friends; nor in the silence that held them all.

But when they were inside the store — which had become a tacit headquarters since the burning of the hotel — the most optimistic could scarcely doubt the unfriendly attitude of the chief, who refused to sit down before the fire, refused even the tobacco proffered by Gaylord.

“My camp heap cry,” he said with grim terseness. “One time boys walk — run — laugh. Now no run, no laugh. Two boys dead, two brave heap dead, one brave big hole in leg. Say white men come in dark, heap shootum. Say mebbby-so all Indians come killum white men for killum boys, killum men. Me say no killum, me come make talk, fin’ out why yoh go shootum Indians. Mebbby-so killum white men bimeby — I dunno. I like for know why yoh killum boys. Boys no fightum white man. All same like yoh killum papoose!”

It was the longest speech they had ever heard him make in English (if such it could be called) and it proved that he was in dead earnest and wanted to make sure that every man present understood the state of affairs. No interpreter, it seemed, was wanted by Que-ta-pat-so that day.

“Your Injuns came here, stole our horses, our guns, our fur coats, that’s why!” Captain Wheeler

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stood up tall and menacing before him. "We went after our horses. Your men had killed them. They wore our coats. They had fires and were getting ready for a feast — to eat our saddle horses. If that ain't reason enough for killing," he finished sternly, forgetting the idiom, "I don't know what is! "

Willwoll Pushback gave a grunt and spoke behind his hand to Beans Tom, who passed the word along to Dick Pitch and Buffalo Jim. Buffalo Jim listened and grunted something to Que-ta-pat-so.

"To-sarke mebbly-so killum hoss," Que-ta-pat-so answered the charge. "Why yoh no killum To-sarke? Why yoh killum Emo? He my brother. He no stealum hoss. He young boy — good boy. Why yoh killum Emo, yoh no killum To-sarke? "

"Why your brother go with To-sarke to eat our horses?" Milt countered that stab. "We don't know who was in the bunch. We go where Indians make a fire in the bushes to eat our horses. We see Indians with our coats on their backs. Why they come here and steal our coats? Now To-sarke has got our guns. Indians shoot at us, we shoot at Indians. Maybe so we kill somebody, but we don't know for shore. Emo should be asleep in the chief's lodge, then he's all right. He don't get shot." Having said his say, Milt waited for the answer, the others standing silent, knowing full well how the

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fate of Whisky Flat might hang on the next ten minutes.

Killing Emo Mike, as the white men called him, made the situation even more serious than they had thought it. For Emo Mike was the pride of Waunona's heart, her youngest and her dearest. They all knew the boy well enough; a tall, good-looking youth with a gleam in his eyes that was not yet evil, but full of deviltry nevertheless. He had been one of the young fellows who stood back in the shadows and ate taffy without first pulling it until it crackled, as he was told to do. His hand had been extended eagerly for the scorched “old maids” when the pan of half-popped corn was being passed. No one believed that he had helped in the horse stealing. Probably he had later gotten wind of something going on up the creek, and had stolen away from camp with his friends. They could not believe that he had been one of To-sarke's wild crowd, which Lubelle had said was unruly and much inclined to make trouble for Que-ta-pat-so. Poor Emo Mike had been a victim, and who dared prophesy at that moment what would be the result?

Que-ta-pat-so's black eyes travelled deliberately around the group, flicking each face with a glance; counting noses, evidently, for presently he turned to Milt and spoke a sentence in Shoshone, and made the sign of a galloping horse.

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"Black Thunder? Ask the wolves on the mountain, who run when the moon swims through the night. Who can tell where the thunder goes?" Milt glanced sidelong at the others. "He asks where is the Black Thunder that rides with death in his feet," he interpreted.

"He is a man," Que-ta-pat-so said harshly. "The squaw who came with the white girl has said it. He laughs much — but it is not a good laugh. The bad ones laugh when they kill. Perhaps our medicine man Tavi-bo can take away the evil spirit that laughs."

"Wants Black Thunder for the medicine man to work on," grunted Milt for the benefit of the rest.

"Emo is the son of Sho-kup. He is the brother of a chief. Must he go alone on the spirit trail? A white man sent Emo to live with the spirits. A white man should go with him to show him the way."

Whereat Buffalo Jim nodded his head gravely, his eyes darting malevolently from one frowning pale-face to the other.

"Can we give Que-ta-pat-so the wind that drives the snow into the lodges of the village, so that the chief may punish the wind when the papooses cry with cold?" It was significant that Milt felt impelled to resort to the oratorical imagery affected by the Indians in their councils. "When we can

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give the wind, or the storm clouds that hurl the snow upon the earth, or the cold that brings ice to the river instead of water — then we can give Black Thunder to Que-ta-pat-so.”

“Is Black Thunder then a spirit?” Que-ta-pat-so’s voice betrayed a certain anxiety, an eagerness to know how the white men looked upon this strange young man who bestrode the black demon of a horse and swept the Indians in terror from his path. “Lubelle Wan-washe says that he is but a man.”

“Does Que-ta-pat-so trust the word of a squaw who forsakes her own people to dwell with the white woman and be her servant?” Milt’s eyes mocked the other, though his voice was still grave. “Many Indians could die beneath the feet of Black Thunder, if they trust the word of Lubelle Wan-washe and think he is but a man. Que-ta-pat-so has heard how Black Thunder rode out of the darkness and scattered the Indians who stole the horses of the white men. Let Que-ta-pat-so judge for himself. Lubelle Wan-washe is a woman, and women talk as the leaves rustle in the summer wind. Who listens for wisdom and truth in the tree tops?”

To that question there was no answer which a chief with dignity would care to make.

Que-ta-pat-so stood staring gravely into Milt Frisbee’s eyes, and saw that they did not falter but

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gave him back a grave regard that never dreamed of yielding. Pulling the blanket up over his head, he turned and stalked slowly to the door, his four shabby counsellors following single file behind him. At the door he turned and stood gazing back at the white men, old Buffalo Jim at his elbow. One full minute he stood so, then walked out into the gray blur of the snowy dusk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“ONLY ONE WAY TO FIGURE AN INJUN”

JIM CARVER, wounded in the shoulder and unable to do much save give advice, urged careful preparation for a siege, and, tired though they were, the entire population of Whisky Flat went into conference that evening. What had promised to be a monotonous winter had unexpectedly assumed a sinister aspect fraught with menace for every white person in the valley.

“There’s only one way to figure an Injun,” Jim Carver declared for the third time. “That’s to be prepared for the worst, and maybe more. If things settle down and nothing comes of this fracas, we won’t have to worry none. If we’ve got to fight ’em off, though, it’ll stand us in hand to be ready. Ain’t that right, Milt?”

“Yeah, only you didn’t put it strong enough, Jim. Them was four bad actors Que-ta-pat-so had with him; not To-sarke’s kind of pilgarlic, but far as we’re concerned they’re worse. Beans Tom has got the name of killin’ three prospectors up in Ruby Valley. Didn’t prove it on him, but he done it all right, and outa pure devilment, because he got the chance. Buffalo Jim is one of the old raiders

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along the emigrant trails, from what I can gather. Willwoll toadies to the strongest party — a natural born politician — and Dick Pitch I wouldn't trust fur's I could throw a bull by the tail. Lubelle's been carryin' tales, from the looks of things, and To-sarke was hand-in-glove with Wa-hi and would like to git in power. If that ain't enough, they're goin' into the winter without much grub, and ain't above cattle-stealin'. So we better lay our plans accordin'."

Thus it came about that for the next ten days Whisky Flat went stealthily about various enterprises that would make for the safety of the camp.

Fortunately the store was roomy and solid, with a cellar beneath the whole structure where all the supplies available could be stored. Hasty trips were made in the night to Lucky Chance mine and also to the W Bar camp, and everything of value was moved in to the store. With only seventeen fighting men in the camps it would be worse than foolish to scatter their forces all up and down the valley; especially so when work at the Pass must be continued. Jim Carver had prevailed upon a few of the Indians to help dig, but at their best they accomplished little, and of course they were not to be counted upon in the future.

With all the food, ammunition and camp furnishings safely housed at the store, the men of Whisky

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Flat breathed freer and could turn their attention to the details of defense. Since Christmas night Arlea and the widow Jensen had been given a curtained-off corner of the store near the big fireplace, and now the Porters were prevailed upon to move up from their cabin opposite the livery stable (called the corrals, in Whisky Flat parlance, because the horses were never housed save during the coldest storms). With Andy temporarily crippled it was certain that the two were not safe a long rifle-shot away from the store — a fact which Andy admitted readily enough, though Liz hung back on account of her quarrel with the preacher.

The stable itself was hastily torn down and another one built against the store where it could be protected by riflemen stationed at the loopholes, and a corral was built alongside — the W Bar boys being determined that no more horses of theirs should furnish a feast for To-sarke's friends. The hay was a bulky bother, but the weather was good until New Year and past, and even Dutch Henry and Dolf Norton performed feats of labor astonishing to those who had counted them as being merely two extra mouths to feed. Brother Van and Kentucky Joe helped with the lighter tasks and the three women managed the cooking and dishwashing. There was plenty to do, and few enough hands to do it.

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They saw no Indians, but that did not deceive the older men nor make them feel any safer. Jim Carver considered their quiescence a bad sign, but Milt Frisbee and Gaylord maintained that the Indians were probably taking advantage of the good weather when the game in the mountains would be out, and that the bucks were up in the hills hunting; though Captain Wheeler pessimistically declared that if they were hunting, he was willing to bet that the game they brought in all wore the W Bar brand.

"Fact of the matter is they've had enough," Hugh Whiting argued. "By their own tell, they lost four Injuns and they don't know we lost anybody at all. They ain't anxious for any more of that kinda thing, that's why they're staying to home. And Que-ta-pat-so seen we had right on our side; that's another reason."

"We've got to get the Pass opened up," Dolf Norton urged, just as if he were the only one who had thought of that necessity.

"We've got to ride herd on the cattle," Captain Wheeler pointed out. "Won't have a hoof left, time grass starts, if we don't watch 'em."

"Well, we'll have to work both crews out from here," Milt stated practically. "Ride out in the morning and back at night, and keep yore eyes peeled, is the only way I know of doin'. And an-

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other thing seems to me is important, and that's for Lew to keep under cover with that black horse of hisn. He's our high trump, to my notion. Lew, you can fix a stall in the cellar for Selim, and use that back entrance — only a tunnel had better be run to the dugout, for more reasons than one; the main one bein' that we need the dugout darn bad for sleepin' quarters, but we might need to git inside the store mighty quick, too, if the Injuns should jump us in the night.”

“But why have the stall in the cellar?” Brother Van mildly inquired.

“Just so Black Thunder can go on bein' a devil, seekin' whom he may devour,” Milt grinned. “Kinda tough on Lew, mebby, but if he can scare 'em to death it'll save us a lot of gunpowder.”

“But it would be sinful to practise such a deception on ignorant savages,” Brother Van protested with some heat. “All my prayers and teaching have been directed against such gross superstitions as this. I myself have told the Indians that the man they call Black Thunder has no supernatural power whatever. Your suggestion borders on the Black Art, Brother Frisbee. As well permit our poor dear sister here to practise her witchcraft outright ——”

“Looky here! Don't you call *me* sister,” Liz snapped at him. “I ain't no sister to anybody that

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says I practise witchcraft. The good Lord says to call on Him in time of trouble, and He don't say whether you should git down and holler for help on your knees, or whether you should take and write certain words on a piece of paper and bury it. I'm willin' everybody should do it in their own way — but I notice that parson-prayin' didn't help nobody on Christmas night! And I notice there ain't been a sign of trouble sence I wrote out the charm for spellbindin' against thieves, murderers and also enemies, and put it in a certain secret place ——”

“ My good woman, do you know that charms and spellbinding are of the devil? God will surely punish such ——”

“ You needn't ‘ good-woman ’ *me*, if you please! My spellbindin' has worked for a hull week an' kep' the Injuns away from here, and two men was killed Christmas whilst I was asleep an' you was up an' prayin' all night. It's plain to be seen who's doin' the most good! An' if it's good, ain't that the Lord's doin's? ”

“ For my part, I think you're both right and both wrong, and with all your spellbinding and all your prayers you would neither of you dare go down to the Indian camp and see why Lubelle has never come near since Christmas. You pray and you work spells — but I see you don't put your noses outside after dark, to test out whether the Lord is tak-

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ing care of you or not! ” Arlea gave the combatants a toss of her head and a smile for each, and rustled away in her mother’s brown alpaca with the blue brocaded muffler which she wore primly as a kerchief.

“ Arlea, my child, would you laugh in the Lord’s face? ” Brother Van called after her in a distressed tone.

“ I’m not laughing in anybody’s face, Brother Van,” Arlea protested demurely, turning again to the argument. “ I only said that if I had the faith to ask God for help to get out of this valley, I’d have the faith to expect God to answer my prayer, and go straight down to the Pass all ready for Pioche. I’m afraid, Brother Van, that you don’t really expect your prayers to be answered, or you’d get ready and start right out.

“ And Liz doesn’t really believe in her charms either, or she wouldn’t be so afraid to have Andy walk out of her sight. I’m sure he’s carrying charms and talismans enough to save the whole State of Nevada from harm! And when I had toothache yesterday, Liz said I could cure it by cutting out a piece of green sod before sunrise, breathe on it three times and put it back in the same place. But how could I, with two feet of snow on the ground? And there was another way, but that one needed an apple tree; she said no

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other tree would do. So," Arlea finished with a little shake of her head, "I had to go back to plain old oil of cloves, and that stopped the ache. So I think charms are all right just for a game, and prayers are all right for church; but when you come right down to it, every one knows we have to depend on ourselves."

"Is that so!" Liz came closer and stood with her chapped hands knuckling bony hips. "Seems to me I remember a young lady about your size that come to me the other day and asked me if there's any charm in my little black book for makin' a certain person like another person. And I says 'yes,' s'I, 'there is, but it takes the small bones which a vulture has in its knees,' s'I. An' she says, 'Have you got any, Liz, down at the cabin?' An' I says ——"

"Liz Porter, you horrid old tattletale! Anyway, I was only fooling. The idea!"

"Well," Liz cried maliciously, "you was foolin' too, I s'pose, havin' your eyes red as a hunk uh raw meat from bawlin' because a certain feller in this camp won't look at you if he can look around yuh! Foolin' my granny! You did too want them vulture's knees to try 'em on a certain person — and I sh'd think," she added with sour malice, "you'd ask the parson to git down an' *pray* your feller into a change uh heart!"

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“I *was* fooling — you’re so silly with your toad-liver charms and your crazy rhymes and crosses in the air. I only wanted to see what you’d have to say. And if my eyes were red, that’s nothing to you, is it? Goodness knows there are plenty of things to cry about in this — this — *hell-hole!*”

Plainly, Arlea had listened to talk not always meant for a young lady to hear. She gave Brother Van a defiant look and walked off with her back very straight and her head held high.

“Yeah,” Liz cried spitefully after her, “that’s all right, but you ain’t foolin’ nobody a minute by denyin’ it. There’s a certain feller you’d give your eyes if he’d ——”

“Liz, shut your mouth!” Burt Gaylord’s eyes blazed with anger. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Miss Owen is entitled to the greatest consideration — alone among strangers as she is. You’re old enough to know better, if she isn’t.”

A slow flush crept into Liz’s sallow cheeks and her lips quivered, though the words they uttered were firm enough.

“Seems to me a feller oughta practise what he preaches, then!” was what she said as she flounced off.

That ended the discussion, though it left its effect on Whisky Flat. There was not a man under fifty but wondered whether he might possibly have

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been the one for whom the vulture's knees were wanted. Even Dolf Norton took to soaping his big red mustache on the sly to make it curl up at the ends, and the W Bar boys combed their hair three times a day instead of once before breakfast. A seemingly thankless effort to please, since Arlea would not speak to a soul save the widow Jensen, and absolutely refused to look at any man in camp.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LAUGHING LEW DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WOMEN

ANOTHER week dragged by with nothing to mark its passing save perhaps a tension of the nerves that manifested itself in glum silences too often broken by petulant speech, or sporadic attempts on the part of the younger men to inject a little mirth into the atmosphere. But forced jokes breed quarrels more often than laughter.

Some one shot a buzzard and tactlessly hung it over the curtain wire so that Arlea could not fail to see it when she awoke in the morning. A joke it was meant to be and nothing more, though the perpetrator should have known better; for Arlea and Liz had not been on what is called speaking terms since the vulture's knee bones were openly and acrimoniously discussed in public. Moreover, the joke should have been played on Liz if any one.

But there hung the buzzard, so close to Arlea's bed that she almost screamed at sight of the ugly dead thing with its rusty black feathers looking rustier than in life. A cruel jest, whether it was meant to be so or not, for the girl had suffered agonies of humiliation over the malice of Liz, mag-

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nifying her shame as youth will ever do. Now her mortification sent waves of resentment quivering along her shrinking nerves and she saw nothing but contemptuous ridicule in the sly offering.

She turned hot cheeks to the pillow and wept miserable, heartsick tears which had for a week been pent behind her pride. But that pride presently rose against the outrage and clamored for a fitting punishment to be inflicted on the brute who had done this thing.

For a long time she lay there and thought about it, trying to decide whether an attitude of silent contempt on her part would not be mistaken for meek acceptance of the insult. It seemed to her that this affront demanded some action on her part, and the longer she thought about it the higher her anger boiled. Ladylike docility was all very well in a civilized community, she told herself fiercely, but it was lost on the brutes who had played this shabby trick.

She lay and listened to the small clattering sounds of breakfast, which Milt insisted on cooking, and later to the mumbled talk as the men gathered around the table that had been set in the middle of the floor near the fireplace when it was decided to use the store for living quarters. They were talking of their plans for the day, deciding upon which four men should drive to the Pass and work

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at clearing the road; a stupendous task under the existing conditions, one might judge from the discouragement in their voices now that the women were not supposed to be listening.

This was the most prized half hour of the whole day, when Arlea loved to snuggle into her blankets for another nap, the warmth and the crackling fire beyond the curtain luxuriously mingling with her half waking dreams. But now she dressed with nervous little twitches at buttons and hooks, pulled the dead buzzard down with so vicious a yank that she nearly brought the curtain with it, and went out and faced them all like a young fury, flinging the odious carcass into their very midst.

"I should like to know who hung that thing by my bed in the night!" she cried harshly. "He ought to be shot, whoever he is. I see the meaning, plainly enough, and I just want to know who did it. Baldy, you and Deacon and Lige and Lem were off riding up the valley yesterday. Do you know who shot that buzzard (I suppose it was very humorously meant to be called a vulture!) and hung it over my curtain? Did *you* do it?"

"No ma'am!" Baldy swallowed so hurriedly that a drop of coffee went into his windpipe and nearly strangled him. While he coughed he continued shaking his head in violent denial of any knowledge of the affair. "I should say not!" he

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cried huskily as soon as he could speak. "I wouldn't do a dirty trick like that. You *know* I wouldn't!"

"Well, I hope not. Did you do it, Lige?"

"No mom, I don't know nothin' atall about it. I s'pose somebuddy thought you wanted one, an' ——"

"That will do," snapped Arlea like a teacher to a stupid pupil. "Lem, what about you? — Deacon? — Well, unless one of you lies ——"

"Good gosh! Why, Arlea, you know there ain't a man in the outfit that would do yuh such a trick!" Little Baldy protested with tears in his eyes — although these may have been caused by his efforts to clear his windpipe.

"Oh, there may be — one!" Arlea studied the faces there, one after the other. Burt Gaylord's keen gaze made her flush a little and look away, but Milt Frisbee saved her from the necessity of carrying her inquisition farther.

"If there was any way it coulda got there by itself, Arlea, I'd say that's how it come to be there. But a-course somebody put it there. He done it for a joke, but it's a darn poor one, and if he's present he can call me a liar when I say he's got about as much manners as a yellow cur dog and I'd boot him off the place if we was situated different here. But if you're worryin' about what was said the

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other day, Arlea, you jest forgit it. Nobody pays any attention to Liz Porter. She's loony about half the time, and that's my honest opinion. I wouldn't believe her under oath — 'specially when she's gettin' off some jealous yarn to hurt a person's feelin's. She's homely as a mud fence. Her kind can't stand beauty in other folks ——"

That, of course, settled the quizzing. Silenced, Arlea retreated behind her curtain, where the widow Jensen was snoring gently on the farther side of the bed.

She listened to the sounds of departure, wondering when the real culprit would venture to show himself. Of course none of the others knew anything about it; she really hadn't expected that they would. No, she told herself, there was only one man in the valley who seemed to delight in annoying her. He, of course, was Laughing Lew, whose brown eyes held a provocative twinkle whenever she inadvertently met his unfathomable gaze. More than once in the last two weeks she had suspected him of wanting to open a conversation, but since he never had apologized for his impudence in sending her a locket and chain for Christmas she certainly was not going to encourage him in further presumption.

But Lew did not come. His big black horse with the arched neck and the flashing eyes had also dis-

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appeared from its stall in the cellar; she knew because she slipped down the stairs and looked. When she mentioned the fact to Brother Van, hoping that he would know something about it, she let loose a half-hour's impromptu preaching against the arts and wiles of the devil; from which she gathered that Laughing Lew was playing the rôle of Black Thunder again for some reason. A senseless performance, since the Indians weren't doing a thing out of the way.

Then, just as dusk was creeping out from the canyons and stealthily erasing the familiar landmarks of the valley, some one came in through the back room, now used for sleeping quarters for Brother Van, Kentucky Joe and Jim Carver. Arlea was busy and paid no attention until Lew's voice spoke just behind her.

"The smell of that stew would make the gods throw their ambrosia to Circe's pigs! What is it? Rabbit?"

His tone was amiable, even conciliating; as if the youth of him was reaching out wistfully for her friendship. But the girl turned and gave him a look of scorn.

"Oh, no! That is the vulture you so kindly left for me last night!"

"The vulture I left?" Lew swung round from the fire where he was warming his chilled hands,

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and stared. "Why should I leave you a vulture, if you'll pardon my asking?"

"To annoy me, I suppose. You seem to delight in that peculiar pastime, Mr. Wheeler."

"I fear you flatter yourself, Miss Owen. My occasional presence may annoy you, but I assure you that whatever delight there is in it I would willingly forego. 'Needs must when the devil drives'."

"Oh, speaking of devils — you seem to be specializing in mystery, these days, Mr. Wheeler." Arlea gave him a supercilious smile calculated to goad him into plain speech.

"The sport seems fashionable," Lew ironically retorted.

"I am sure I have never indulged in it," Arlea unguardedly replied, feeling not quite so sure of her ground.

"No? Then we must differ in the meaning of the word. To me it seems very mysterious to send even Christmas gifts to one who is utterly detested." He touched a breast pocket significantly. "Or to wear the gift of an enemy," he added, glancing down at her meaningly. "But then, I don't pretend to understand the working of the feminine mind."

His last words went unheard as her hand lifted instinctively to her throat where the blue muffler was tied.

"I never gave you a thought, much less a gift,

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Lew Wheeler," she cried hotly. "I merely returned one which you were impudent enough to send me. And as for the muffler, Mr. Gaylord is a man for whom I have the highest respect and esteem."

Lew stepped closer until he stood towering over her. He reached out and touched the blue silk.

"What has Burt got to do with it? I got this muffler for your Christmas—because all the rest were giving something and it was the decent, courteous thing to do. And if you didn't send me this chain and locket, then Baldy's a liar. I must confess I—er—wondered! It didn't harmonize with your manner before or since Christmas, and I could only accept it as a fleeting holiday impulse. As I say, I don't pretend to understand women. But since you wore my muffler—I kept the locket." He stared searchingly into her face, which had gone blank. "You must have meant it for me," he said slowly, as if his mind was groping along the path of logic. "You addressed the package yourself—no one in the valley but you could write that fine, even hand. Moreover, there's your picture in the locket!" His hand dropped peremptorily to her shoulder as she stood staring dazedly up at him. "If you hate me so you can't treat me with common politeness, why did you send me your picture, and that locket and chain?" he challenged.

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"I — didn't!" Her voice was faint, but it was consternation that made it so. "You sent it to me — without a word. And I returned it."

"I sent you a picture of yourself?" He twitched impetuously at his pocket and pulled out a flat little buckskin case, hand sewed and very neat. "Don't be absurd. Of course you sent it to me — but God only knows why! Not for friendship, certainly. And how would I have your picture, unless you gave it to me?"

Dumbly she held out her hand for the trinket, leaned and looked at it by the light of the fire.

"Open it," he insisted, and when she fumbled the locket ineffectively he gave a mocking laugh, slipped the locket out of her unresisting fingers and touched the hidden spring. "There. Since you still pretend you don't know anything about it, look!"

Arlea bent closer, looked, gave a little cry and looked again.

"Why, it's grandmother's picture!" She glanced swiftly, incredulously up at Laughing Lew — who was frowning now with sheer bewilderment — and drew her fingers slowly across her eyes. "It's grandmother, I know it is. My mother had a picture like that, only it was larger. I — I can't understand how you ——"

"Well, your grandmother was certainly a fine

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looking old lady," Lew foolishly observed. "I thought sure it was you."

"Oh, you did! Well, I may look like my grandmother, Mr. Wheeler, but why on earth should I give you her picture?"

"Echo answers, 'why'?" Lew spread his hands in the gesture that indicates complete bafflement.

"Perhaps you meant to send me something else, and sent this by mistake," he suggested after a pause.

"I did not! Why should I want to send you anything at all?"

"Good Lord, how can I tell why you do anything? Why have you treated me like a — a toad in your dish-pan?" Lew's temper was up, and still rising. "I can stand that, all right — if you didn't contradict your loathing with this darned present-giving! And I'll bet you sleep in that muffler I gave you!"

"I could kill you!" Furiously Arlea was twitching at the knot in the suddenly detestable silk. "*There's* your darned old present! I'd have burnt the thing on Christmas if I'd known who sent it!" With a last vicious yank she tore the muffler from her neck and flung it to the flames. "If you ever speak to me again, I'll — I'll slap your face!" With that she was gone.

"Damn a woman!" said Laughing Lew between

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clenched teeth. "About as much sense as a drunken Injun! Always hollering their heads off about some damn' thing ——"

Limp folds shining on the hearth, the blue muffler caught fire and began to blaze at one corner. Lew stooped and snatched it away from the flames, smothering the blaze in his hand.

"Burn a good, warm scarf!" he muttered indignantly. "Might keep a fellow's face from freezing ——" But his fingers caressed the soft folds, and in spite of himself his eyes dwelt wistfully upon the crease where her hair had rubbed the silk.

"Darn her ornery hide!" he gritted under his breath — but his lips twitched oddly while he said it.

He did not wait for the men to come in for supper, but helped himself liberally to stew, ate with ravenous haste, and afterward stuffed his coat pockets with emergency rations. When he went forth again into the night, the blue silk muffler was folded snugly away in his pocket where the chain and locket had been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“FOR EVERY COW, A WHITE MAN’S SCALP!”

SINCE that night of the quarrel with Arlea, Laughing Lew Wheeler vanished from her sight as completely as do the dead. Nor was his rollicky laugh heard along the hoofbeaten trails when a group of cowboys rode out in a vain attempt to guard the cattle from the swishing arrows that stealthily brought them down. His coat, made of the skins of wolves which Lew himself had shot, no longer made a flitting gray shadow as he rode among the frozen bushes along the creek.

But one night when the dogs of the Indian village rushed out yammering in the starlight and a dozen belligerent bucks snatched up weapons and ran to see who or what was prowling near camp, a great black horseman came riding through the trees, his face a grinning, glowing skull, the horse a demon breathing fire. The warriors would have made a stand against him, but the apparition was too appalling with its huge feet of lambent flames that must certainly have been lighted in hell, so pale and sickly a gleam they cast. The young warriors had slunk back to their tepees; and the next morning there in the snow were the tracks of some

“For Every Cow”

gigantic beast who trod lightly over drifts where any hoofed animal would struggle and flounder and make no headway at all.

Que-ta-pat-so himself stalked superciliously out to see what his braves had found to make them afraid of their own shadow. Behind him walked Lubelle, Waunona who grieved bitterly for her son Emo, and Manlerta Pushback who was learning English from Lubelle and who followed her slavishly everywhere. Que-ta-pat-so meant to prove to his braves how foolish was their fear of Black Thunder, who was but a man, as Annie Green-Leaves had observed while she nursed Joe back from death and stolidly watched Lew come and go, riding the big black horse that danced and lunged and scattered the other riders but showed no sign of supernatural powers.

But when they reached the place where the rider they called Black Thunder had passed, there were the great round tracks on the tops of the drifts, just as the young braves had said. No man nor beast could have made those tracks. As large across as the baskets the squaws wove for the gathering of pine nuts, were these mysterious footprints, and they were round as the tracks of the big lynx that squalled on the mountainside at night. Not even Lubelle Wan-washe could comprehend how any mortal beast or man might make those

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tracks. Certainly not that black horse which Lew Wheeler rode boldly into Whisky Flat. And yet the tracks were surely there, melting a little around the edges where the sun bit into the broken crust of the snow.

"I do not know," said Lubelle in fluent Shoshone, after they were back in the village and talking the marvel over in the seclusion of Waunona's tepee. "But I will go to the white man's camp and see if the one they call Laughing Lew is there. If he has turned into a demon he cannot at the same time be a young man who laughs much."

So in the late afternoon Lubelle started up the trail to Whisky Flat to see for herself whether Laughing Lew was there with his horse, or whether he had turned into a demon as seemed likely — since even an Indian must have some sort of explanation for the impossible. Her visit must have been brief, however, for the orange and gold of sunset was still tinting faintly the hilltops when she came striding back again with her thick braids waving gently over her breast with the night breeze and the swiftness of her walk.

"Now at last I know the heart of the white man," she said with cold scorn to Que-ta-pat-so and those who were sitting with him around the tepee fire to hear what Lubelle had to say. "With their lips they tell of a kind God who loves His children, and

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their hearts are like stones that lie under the snow. That Arlea Owen I have held next my heart while she wept, as a mother holds her dear ones in their sorrow. Now she says that I am bad and have forgotten my white friends, and would spy upon them that I may come and tell you when is the time to go and kill them all. And that old man who talks so much of God, that Brother Van who sings and prays and tells people of heaven and hell! Now he says that I am of the devil. He says that I have come here because I am the enemy of the white people. He says that I have told you lies. When I did not go like a child and ask his consent before I come here to nurse the sick as Annie nursed their sick, that old man, he says that I have done a wicked thing and that their God will cast my soul in burning fires of hell!

“Is a friend not a friend because her skin is dark? Should I let the papooses die because they are not white? Am I a slave of that white girl, who would have me fetch and carry and be her servant? Am I not free, to come when I please? Did Arlea buy me with money, as they bought the black men? Because my heart was soft I nursed her sick mother, and was kind to the girl afterward. I, Lubelle Wan-washe, am not a dog to come when a white girl snaps the finger!

“I have lived long with the white people and I

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have learned their ways and have prayed to their God. They have called me friend. They have said that their God would welcome me to His heaven because I am good. Is this their friendship then?

“I had warm blankets that were mine because I worked to pay for them. I had food that was mine and that I did not eat, but put it away for the papooses. When the white men had feasted and were laughing beside the fire, then I brought my warm blankets to my friends in this camp who were cold. I brought my good food to the papooses who were hungry. It is what their good man Jesus Christ told the white people that they must do if they would dwell in His heaven. And they gave gifts to all, because it was the birthday of that Jesus Christ. I came to tell you that the white men had thought kindly of their red brothers on that night, when they were full from their feast. My heart was very glad. The white men had put money in a pan to pay for fat cattle that their red brothers might eat. Did I not come quickly to tell you that the cattle had been bought with white man's money, so that the Indians would not hunger through the cold?

“I came fast, for To-sarke had said to his friends that they would have good meat that night. I waited only to get my warm blankets and the good things I had saved from the feast. I did not see

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To-sarke afterward. I did not know that he meant to take the horses and eat them. I would have told To-sarke that this would be very bad, when the white men had paid for cattle, and it would make the young men very angry. I came to the camp, for the night was cold and the papooses were hungry. I did not know that To-sarke had killed the horses and that the young white men had come and killed Waunona's son, and Manlerta's son, and the husband of Ezell Sneux, and Frank Sam.

“Now they say I am the enemy of the white people because I told you that I did not think Black Thunder was a bad spirit but a good young man who laughs much. Yet if I told you he was a spirit I would lie, and their God has said that He would burn in hell all those who tell lies. Then why do they say I am wicked because I will not lie? That Brother Van told Que-ta-pat-so that Black Thunder is no more than a man who can do no more than any man. Then why is he not an enemy of the white people as I am an enemy? Is it because I am Indian and he is a white man? Bah! Then I say their God is no God for Indians but only for white men who can obey their God or not, as they please!”

“And is Black Thunder there, and is he a man or a spirit?”

Black Thunder

After the customary silence Que-ta-pat-so put the question, and all the eyes turned as one pair to Lubelle, who stood just within the closed doorway. They watched her face as if they hoped to read the answer before it reached her lips.

"I do not know what he is. I know the white men are liars. I saw them put much money in the pan to pay for the cattle which the Indians would eat this winter. Now they say to me that the Indians steal the cattle, and that they must stop eating cattle or they will be killed. I say to them that the white men steal the money that was put in the pan to pay for the cattle. I say that the cattle were a gift for Christmas, and how can the Indians steal what is bought for them? They say no matter, they will not let the Indians eat cattle, because To-sarke and To-sarke's friends have killed the horses of the young men. I say to Burt Gaylord that the white men are liars, and that they have stolen the money from the pan. I say four Indians give their lives to pay for those horses. They say I am a liar. I come away."

"Lubelle Wan-washe is not a liar," said Que-ta-pat-so gravely. "We believe the words that have been spoken — but we would hear more."

"You shall hear," cried Lubelle, fresh indignation thrilling through her voice as she remembered the distrust of those she had thought were her

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friends. “ You shall hear, for this is a message which was sent to all. The white men say, ‘ Kill no more cattle or the white men will kill; a man’s life for a cow! ’ ” She laughed shrilly, flinging out her arms, her head thrown back.

“ See! All you brave ones! Your lives are worth one cow! So you shall pay for your Christmas gift — it is the Captain Wheeler who said so, and no man said, ‘ Tell Que-ta-pat-so it shall not be ’.”

Que-ta-pat-so got deliberately to his feet and stood with his arms folded, as if he faced the formal council fire.

“ This I would ask,” he said slowly, a grim quality beneath the smoothness of his voice. “ How much, then, for the life of a white man? ”

“ Ho-ho! ” cried To-sarke who had crept into the circle. “ The white men have said it — for every cow, a white man’s scalp! ”

There were murmurings and throaty chuckles that held no mirth. For the time being no one remembered the strange, huge tracks on top of the snow-drifts, where Black Thunder had passed. No one recalled how the boldest dogs that had rushed up to snap at the heels of the phantom yelped and went ki-yi-ing into the camp as if yellow-bodied wasps had stung them.

“ For every Indian who is sent by a white man

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to take the spirit trail," Que-ta-pat-so declared, "a white man shall go with him to bear him company. And we will eat the cows that have been bought with white man's money for a gift to the Indians on their great white chief's birthday. If you wish to talk about this thing, let the council fire be lighted. We will smoke and we will talk of this message sent by the white men whose hearts have turned black and hard like the stones on the hillside.

"And you should also watch," cried Lubelle with a cold ferocity that would have prickled the scalp of Arlea had she heard. "For there are tracks leading this way from Whisky Flat, and they were made by that one they call the Galloping Swede. Many tracks had he made, for he comes to spy upon this camp. So be careful how you sit beside the council fire, my people. And see that you do not dance nor sing the song of war. For the Galloping Swede has big ears and his eyes can see in the dark, and his legs are long and will lay fresh marks of his feet swiftly in the snow when he runs to tell those white men — whom I hate!"

"Ho-ho!" cried To-sarke the impudent. "Will you get me the white girl for my squaw, Lubelle Wan-washe?"

"No!" Lubelle turned on him in fierce disdain. "My heart is black toward all white people. But

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the white girl, Arlea, is guarded well by two white spirits that are her mother and her father. They will destroy with a breath of fire all who would make Arlea weep. I have seen them stand beside her, and their eyes were like green fires darting this way and that way, never closing in sleep but watching always lest some danger come to the girl. That night we came among you, the man who harmed her would have died as Wa-hi died when he boasted that he would send her along the fire trail. Fool! Would you die as Wa-hi died, with a flash of flame in the dark and a hole in your breast where the heart had been torn out? ”

“ Why did you keep this in your heart till now? ” Que-ta-pat-so turned slowly and looked at her gravely, something bordering on reproach in his voice.

“ I am not a child, to chatter the things that need not be said. If you do not believe, let To-sarke take Arlea to his lodge — and die! ”

“ And what of Black Thunder? ”

“ I do not know. I thought he was but a young man who laughed and sang and did harm to no one. But I could not learn anything of him in camp. Arlea asked me what has become of Laughing Lew, and her eyes were full of trouble. So I know he is not there. For her lips say that her heart is black toward Laughing Lew, but her eyes say that

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her lips speak lies. I do not know. Ask To-sarke, who knows more than I."

"There are the tracks on the top of the snow where a man will sink to his body," To-sarke made sullen reply to the veiled taunt.

"His face was the face of a devil. The black horse walked in flames. Fire was in his nostrils," a young man muttered.

"But the Black Thunder looked and saw that fat meat was in the kettles, and then he rode away," Lubelle said shrewdly. "So he does no harm, why, let the Black Thunder ride!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“A MAN WON’T DIE TILL HIS TIME COMES”

THOUGH Arlea saw nothing of him, and no man at Whisky Flat ever discussed him in her presence, Lew Wheeler was playing as best he could his part in the bleak drama of the valley. A lonely part, and one filled with danger. Dressed in the plaid mackinaw and striped cap of skunk-skin which Long John Woods had worn with childish pride in its conspicuous markings, he rode slowly down the creek on a rawboned gray horse that nevertheless had speed and endurance to atone for his ugliness. A season of cold winds had struck the valley, and the gray’s hair was rough and frost-rimed as he picked his way cautiously between drifts too deep for even his long legs to flounder through.

Once Lew pulled the horse to a shivering stand while he regarded critically a line of tracks bearing no resemblance to bird, man or beast — unless an elephant might conceivably have passed that way; but then the weight of so huge an animal would have driven the footprints to the very bottom of the drifts, instead of leaving a shallow print on top. Lew grinned and went on, weaving in and out among the rocks and bushes of the creek bottom, careful to keep well under cover.

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Once when he heard the barking of a dog not far away he pulled his coat collar higher so that all of his face was hidden save his eyes and his tanned cheek-bones. For while his face was not familiar to the Indians, Lubelle Wan-washe might be prowling somewhere near, and he had no desire that her keen eyes should penetrate his disguise. For although the dead Lucky Chance man probably would not be missed, Long John with his glaring mackinaw and skunk-skin cap had been too conspicuous a figure on horseback to pass unremarked, or to drop out of existence without having his absence noticed by the Indians; especially when they would be watching for absences. Five to one were long odds against Whisky Flat, even though the Shoshones were poorly armed and miserably housed, and it was important that no white man should seem to be missing.

The Galloping Swede had regularly reported cooking fires that wafted afar the odor of boiled beef, and he declared that fresh cowskin tepees might be detected among the bushes on the new campsite if one cared to creep close enough to see them. Moreover, he argued that one may take it as a sign of plenty when the curs lie full-bellied in the sun and need not range outside of camp for bones to gnaw.

So it would seem that the ultimatum delivered

“Man Won’t Die Till Time Comes”

to the Shoshones by Lubelle was being flagrantly defied. The men of Whisky Flat were beginning to talk about sallying forth in a body and teaching the thieves a lesson, though not exactly the one Captain Wheeler had promised to Lubelle. Killing an Indian for every cow that was slaughtered, even that choleric old gentleman confessed was not quite practicable when you came right down to brass tacks. If they could catch them red-handed at the butchering as they had done on Christmas night, it would be different. But the Indians were too wily for that. Evidently they knew every move of the white men, and timed their beef stealing with a skill little short of diabolical. And to go out quietly to stalk an Indian and shoot him down was a bit too cold-blooded to appeal to decent men; though the Swede, Ole, declared that he would kill the first Indian he caught away from camp.

But not long after Lubelle’s short visit to the store the Galloping Swede failed to return as usual from a reconnoissance down the valley, and Gaylord sent word to Lew to keep an eye out for him. So Lew was looking for Ole; riding cautiously in the guise of Long John Woods with his plaid mackinaw and striped fur cap.

To a W Bar man the likeness would have been incomplete, because this counterfeit Long John did not whistle nor sing monotonously that fragment of

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a doleful ditty which had been the dead cowboy's one diversion when riding alone—and too frequently when he rode with his fellows. To the boys of the W Bar the thought of Long John brought vividly to mind that nasal, whining voice of his crooning over and over again:

Toll, toll the bell-ll, for love-ly Nell
 So quicklee passed away-y;
Toll, toll the bell-ll,
 A sad and mournful lay-y,
For bright-eyed, laughing lit-tle Nell
 Of Narragansett Bay!

That, and the clocklike regularity with which he spat tobacco juice into the snow beside the trail. But Laughing Lew did not feel like singing, even if he dared advertise his presence; and he did not chew tobacco.

Lew was like his father. He considered cattle-stealing one of the greatest crimes in the calendar. He had a vast contempt for Indians and made no distinctions in tribe or individual character. In his estimation Indians were a dirty, thieving lot and their contact with white men had not improved them any. His rage against these Shoshones for what had happened on Christmas night hardened to a colder, more implacable fury with each fresh sign of the slaughter of W Bar beef.

At first the idea had been to send Black Thunder

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to the W Bar camp at night to stand guard over the stock. But that plan would not work. Selim had ideas of his own when it came to herding cattle, and on the very first night he had started to turn back a restless cow, and had tripped over his ungainly footgear and nearly broken his neck — to say nothing of Laughing Lew’s.

The sight of the phantom horseman floundering on all fours in the snow and afterward struggling profanely with his demon horse would doubtless have amazed any prowling Shoshones that chanced to witness the fall, but it would not have added to their dread of him. So the idea of night-herding with a demon was given up and the cowboys rode in pairs, watchful-eyed and armed for any emergency, with Laughing Lew sometimes riding with them in the rôle of Long John Woods.

He did not blame his dad for sending that message to the Shoshone camp. When the boys told him about it he merely said that dad was getting too easy in his old age, and that one buck for every cow was a pretty low price, and he’d be damned if he’d let good cattle go that cheap.

“And it wasn’t because I didn’t want to hurt any one that I rode past their camp the other night without shooting one of those bucks that came loping out to see what ailed the dogs,” he finished hotly. “I was just trying them out on that phos-

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phorous fire to see how they took it — and besides, Selim wasn't any too sure of his feet in those snowshoes. From now on they'll think Black Thunder carries the lightning in both hands. Do you think I'm just riding around nights to give those dirty whelps a free show?"

"Well, you want to look out," Lem Davis anxiously advised him. "One of them bucks might git scared enough to take a shot at yuh, Lew. And while I admit you look like the devil, that ain't sayin' you wouldn't stop a bullet or an arrow. You look out!"

"Why? A man won't die till his time comes," Lew had carelessly retorted.

"A man can turn the clock ahead if he's fool enough, Lew. You look out, I tell yuh! I don't like this thing of lettin' you go hellin' around nights, and nobody with yuh. Spoils my sleep, and it ain't no use anyhow."

"You notice, don't you, that they didn't get a beef last night or the night before? That's because Black Thunder rode back and forth between their camp and the cattle. Daytimes, you boys can ride line all right, and I'll take the night guard alone. I'm going to take off those damned snowshoes. I've about convinced the Injuns that Selim could fly if he took the notion, and the shoes are darn awkward when you want speed. I know how the snow lies,

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now, and I can easily get around the drifts. I believe I’ve got the stealing stopped. You tell dad I’m not herding the cattle, these nights — I’m herding the Injuns!

“And tell Burt and Milt that they may just as well put the Swede to work with a shovel, helping on the road. He can’t tell us anything we don’t know. He comes trotting in and says the Injuns are eating W Bar beef — and that’s old news. He’s not helping us catch them at it, is he? And he’s not preventing it. So tell them at the store to put him to work where he’ll do some good.”

“Yeah — and what’ll I tell Arlea? Lew, her eyes ain’t red half the time jest because the fire smokes! The girl’s worried about somep’n.”

“Too bad!” Lew told him, with a twitch of the shoulders under the plaid mackinaw. “Well, I’ll be going. Bring over some coffee next time you come, Lem; and some molasses. Will you? And Selim would thank you kindly for some oats if you can spare them. Even devils have to eat, I’ve discovered.”

That had been two hours ago. And now, as he plodded abstractedly down along the creek bank — on a trail that bore the imprint of moccasins in the snow — he was still thinking of clever, ironic messages that he might have sent to Arlea. Obscure taunts which only she would understand flashed

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into his mind now when it was too late; wherefore he invented her probable replies, which he answered with brilliant, pungent epigrams. So absorbed did he become in his imaginary swordplay of sarcasm that he would have ridden straight into the Indian camp if the dogs hadn't smelled him and begun to bark.

He turned back then, more alert to his surroundings and looking for some sign that Ole had passed that way, though he told himself that the Swede had probably reached camp long ago. The short day was nearly gone, and the far hills were darkening at the base and showing rose tints at their snowy crests, like a blush creeping slowly into the cheeks of a fair-skinned girl. Like Arlea's face when she bent to look at the locket in the yellow glow of the fire, Lew thought as he turned to gaze upon the ever changing beauty of the sunset. Whisky Flat lay under that roughhewn peak with the pale light upon it. Warmth and the friendly talk of men were there; hot food prepared by women's skilful hands; Arlea who never had looked at him with a smile in her eyes, but only cold disdain. "Beautiful, pale cold face ——"

A bullet zipped past his head and plopped into a tree trunk beyond, making the bark fly. Lew jerked out of his fruitless dreaming and sent a hasty shot back toward the little patch of blue smoke be-

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side a boulder. Another bullet skittered through the crusted snow on top of a high drift. From the angle, he knew that two indifferent marksmen were practising upon him.

He had no desire to encounter any Indians in his present guise, for as Long John Woods he must not risk showing them his face. So he touched the big gray with his heels and went galloping up the trail and out of sight around a turn, swearing to himself at the necessity which drove him out of the danger zone when he had long been aching for a fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BLACK THUNDER SPOILS A SCALP DANCE

IN the thick willow growth beside the creek, just under the ridge where old Chief Sho-kup had lived and ruled his tribe and gone his way to the spirit land, Lew dismounted and tied the gray out of sight behind a boulder where a crude shelter had been built of brush, and a sack of hay waited for the horse's supper. Then, climbing from rock to rock where the hillside was swept clear of snow, he made his way cautiously up to the deserted old camp ground.

Here a great new tepee stood boldly on the spot where old Sho-kup's lodge had been, close to the edge of the slope. On the side toward the sun sacred symbols were painted, such as the medicine men used and held in deepest reverence. And from that mysterious lodge, plainly revealed where the snow lay sheltered from the wind, great round footprints told that Black Thunder had passed that way.

To erect secretly the tepee, stock it with provender for a horse and food and blankets for a man, and to leave no telltale hoofprints behind had required considerable ingenuity and hard work. But Lew had accomplished the feat, riding to the spot by

Black Thunder Spoils a Scalp Dance

a roundabout trail down the bare ridges, so that he entered the deserted camp ground near the flat-topped rock which had been Wa-hi's pulpit when he prayed to the spirits.

The superstitious awe that made the place taboo among the Indians was another great advantage. Milt Frisbee, Jim Carver, in fact every man he had consulted had assured Lew that a replica of Shokup's tepee, standing on the very spot where the great Burning had been solemnized, would fill every Indian in the valley with such a dread of the place that nothing could induce them to approach the spot. Once they learned that Black Thunder dwelt in the ghost lodge of their chief, his supernatural powers would be forever established in the tribe. It was unlikely that the Shoshones would even venture near enough to discover the temporary quarters of the big gray which he rode whenever he went abroad during the day and so must have close at hand.

But in spite of these advantages which he was quick to appreciate, a depressing lonesomeness hung about the old camp ground and bore heavily upon Lew's spirits as he stood for a moment beside the tepee and stared out over the bleak, wind-swept space where even the snow seemed to be creeping stealthily away in the twilight to find a more friendly spot for lodgment.

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Within the hide shelter the black horse nickered an eager welcome, as if he too felt the desolation and wanted companionship. As his master lifted a corner of the flap and ducked inside, the sickly glow of the phosphorus still showed on the horse's forehead, and his eyes glowed with a greenish cast in the darkness. Lew lighted a lantern and shook out a small ration of grain from the bottom of the sack, Selim stepping restlessly from side to side before his improvised manger, with little snorts and snufflings and impatient headshakes imploring his master to hurry. Not that the horse was so famished; but the day had seemed long since his breakfast, even though he had spent most of it lying down, warm in his lined blanket, dozing the hours away.

While Selim felt carefully with his lips for the last elusive oat kernels in the feed box, Lew pressed an armful of hay into the small, pole manger and pulled the blanket straight on the satiny black shoulders, half-heartedly wishing that he felt as full of energy and zest for life as did Selim. It seemed as though he never had got so little joy out of living, though his whole life had been filled with hardship and danger — save perhaps his school days, which somehow seemed to have counted for very little and to have dropped completely away from him.

Black Thunder Spoils a Scalp Dance

Six months ago, or even three, he would have gone into this Black Thunder business with a sparkle in his eyes and a laugh in his throat, like any boy who had been unexpectedly told to go and play his favorite game for the welfare of the community.

“A lot of tomfoolery! Have to run like a scared rabbit, when we ought to go down there and clean them out!” he muttered resentfully, ignoring the fact that a dozen or so white men, however brave and disdainful of the foe, cannot hope to annihilate a hundred or more of fighting Indians; forgetting too that contempt alone will not kill, nor will it make a man immune to war arrows and bullets. With two men already dead, and two men temporarily unable to fight, and with three women and two noncombatants to guard — three, unless Kentucky Joe’s breathing apparatus functioned more efficiently than it had been doing since his sickness — Whisky Flat needed all the advantage which Black Thunder could give them, and there must be no undue recklessness on the part of any one.

Lew had seen it plainly enough when he offered to assume the rôle. He had realized very keenly what a protection to the whites a well-trained demon could be. In the store, with the flames crackling against the backlog in the fireplace, he had been enthusiastic in planning his reign of

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terror. Here in a cowhide tepee on the spot where a huge funeral pyre had been lighted, hungry and cold and more than a little lonely, Laughing Lew ground his teeth together and called himself a fool for not staying to fight it out with those two, and letting Black Thunder pass into oblivion if that were the outcome of the fight.

He lighted a small fire in the center of the lodge, boiled the last of his coffee and broiled a steak over the flames, which gave the meat a smoky flavor. A comfortless meal, eaten glumly and without relish, though it was his first food since before daybreak when he had ended his eerie patrol.

When he could swallow no more, Laughing Lew saddled Selim, painted the horse's face and his own with phosphorus until they were infernally glowing masks, smeared his father's sword with the stuff until it became a sword of diabolic fire, and led the horse outside where the stars were already beginning to prick through the purple overhead.

An owl hooted dismally in the woods above the silent camp as Lew mounted and rode by the old Indian trail straight down the hill to where the trees began to show close before him. Then, crossing the frozen stream and striking into the beaten trail down the bank of the creek, he touched Selim with his unspurred heels and went galloping down toward the Shoshone camp.

Black Thunder Spoils a Scalp Dance

The frosty air in his face whipped his spirits to a reckless mood. He laughed aloud as he went tearing down the trail, clods of snow flung upward from Selim's unhampered feet. The devil of daring seemed to have communicated itself to the horse, for he pulled and worried at the bit, shook his head and snorted as he swept through the hollows and up the shadowed slopes beyond. Or perhaps the relief from the cumbersome snowshoes demanded expression in speed. Faster and faster he ran; a half mile so, and Lew could not have pulled him up if he had tried.

But Lew did not want to check that mad pace. He only laughed aloud and sent wild diabolical calls through the dark as the reaction from his black mood of an hour ago thrilled intoxicatingly through his veins. For the time being he was the fiend he looked to be. A Swiss song with a yodeling chorus came to his mind and somehow slipped into a high, unearthly strain that carried far through the night, the yodel long-drawn and filled with awful cadences that sent the gray wolves slinking away into the thickets, and drove a lynx snarling into the tree tops where he lay flattened along a limb and glared down with big, round eyes of yellow fire.

In the camp of the Shoshones a shrill tumult of sound swept up the frozen stream to meet the spectral pair that charged down the trail. Black

Black Thunder

Thunder held his own voice suspended on a high note, and a thread of fire seemed to flash along his nerves while he listened. He knew that yelping crescendo with the screeching uplift of voices in savage exultation. Not since his coming into the valley had the Indians held a dance—or if they had it had not been a noisy one. But they were dancing now, and it could not be a sudden celebration over stolen beef. That frenzied yelling and the thud of tom-toms could mean nothing but the scalp dance.

He did not stop to wonder whose scalp was the cause of the jubilation. The hot blood of vengeance began to pound in his temples as a turn in the trail brought the barbaric sounds closer, more horribly clear. His heels drove against Selim's flanks and sent the horse forward at that terrific pace which had made him famous on the cattle ranges of Wyoming.

The new village was oblong in shape, flat and sparsely wooded, with thick willow growth along its northern side next the creek. The site had undoubtedly been chosen because of its sheltered position, and the tepees were set back in the edge of the brush for added protection from the cold winds. Now, flickering here and there down the open space in the center of the village, where sycamores and even stray pines caught streaks of yellow

Black 'Thunder Spoils a Scalp Dance

light and then deeper shadows as the flames leaped high or died into the coals, little fires burned, untended for the most part while the tribe gathered around the dancers who leaped and stamped and trod a devil's measure to the rhythmic beat of the rawhide drums.

So absorbed were they in the unaccustomed orgy of cruel triumph that no one saw the spectral horseman come leaping along through the scattered grove. Beneath the thudding of the drums the sound of galloping hoofs was wholly submerged. All eyes were turned gloatingly to the four scalps which flapped limply at the end of long sticks held aloft as the dancers capered and yelped and sang.

Horror seized upon Laughing Lew as he glimpsed those bloody trophies. A quick look to see if the yellow hair of a woman floated above that blood-thirsty throng; a sharp-drawn breath of relief, a sudden fear that his father's scalp might dangle there, or Burt Gaylord's—or one of the W Bar boys. Then a delirium of rage as remorseless as any cataclysm of nature drove him in among them, the cold flaming sword flailing among the terrified dancers as they huddled away from the dreadful apparition, then broke and ran yelping into the bushes.

One of these Black Thunder pursued, Selim with his mouth wide open, his breath hot upon the fugi-

Black Thunder

tive. Lew dropped the reins to seize the scalp the buck was carrying, and the horse whirled and went lunging back into a milling group that gave way in a panic of fear as the demon approached.

An arrow nervously released from its bow caught Lew in the side with a force that nearly unseated him, but a sidewise lunge of the horse hid his flinching from any eyes that might be watching to see how vulnerable to mortal weapons this fiery fiend might be. Once more the sword descended, and bit so deep into flesh that Lew almost lost his grip of it as he withdrew the blade.

Mechanically he tore the scalp from the stick and thrust the grewsome thing inside his belt, picked up the knotted reins and swung Selim toward the trail by which they had entered the camp. The horse swerved aside to menace a waddling squaw, felt the firm hand of his master on the reins and with a petulant shake of the head swung into the narrow trail that wound through the willow thickets to an open ridge beyond.

When they had passed that ridge Lew fought the horse to a walk, sheathed his sword and began to pull gently at the arrow shaft. It seemed to him that the point must have lodged in a rib, it clung there so tenaciously; but when he stopped the horse and felt cautiously inside his coat, he knew it was the tough leather of his belt that held the barb.

Black Thunder Spoils a Scalp Dance

It yielded to the third pull, and Lew rode on, sick with pain, feeling against his flesh the heat of his blood as it seeped from the wound.

It would never do to leave a trail of blood in the snow to prove him after all a mortal, he thought dully, and gave a bitter little laugh as he pulled the blue silk muffler from his pocket and folded it into a compress which he tucked inside his belt to stop the bleeding.

"I said it was a shame—might come handy sometime," he muttered brokenly, and swayed dizzily in the saddle as he turned Selim into the trail that led to the tepee on the hill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BLACK THUNDER RIDES NO MORE

FULL fed and harboring fancied wrongs that had been done them, with the chief's household mourning the death of Emo and with other bereaved ones in camp to keep the fires of resentment burning, the arrogance of the Shoshones increased with every hour that passed without punishment for the scalps they had taken.

Like a forest fire that starts from one coal left alive in a deserted camp fire, the sanguinary spirit spread swiftly among the Indians when Willwoll Pushback, attacked outside the camp by the Galloping Swede, came swaggering in with loud-mouthed boastings and a tow-haired scalp to prove his prowess. Times had changed among the Shoshones. Only the old men could boast of the scalps they had taken, and Willwoll Pushback betrayed an inordinate pride in that gory evidence of his conquest.

Next, two hunters returning home at sunset caught a glimpse of Laughing Lew and failed to bring him down, much to their disgust. The derision of Willwoll, who flourished his captured scalp in their faces, sent them forth again — and others

Black Thunder Rides No More

with them — to the road where presently the pung with its road gang would be coming up from the Pass.

To ambush the white men at the foot of the long hill where Lubelle and Brother Van had worked so long with the mule team had been so simple that they wondered why they had not thought of it before. They might have had warm fur coats this long while!

The massacre had not been altogether complete, however. In the dusk two men escaped. Pete Jergensen, who had been driving, cut loose the team, mounted one horse and galloped home to tell the direful news, and Sandy Graves had crawled behind a rock with a bullet in his leg, and later reached the store half-frozen and weak from loss of blood. But three scalps were taken and the corpses hastily stripped before the jubilant murderers hurried home to fling his taunts back in Willwoll's face. The scalp dance had just begun when Black Thunder rode furiously down upon them.

That awful visitation held them for a time subdued and very much worried whenever night came down upon the valley. But even fear must have fresh food to feed upon, and when two days had passed and no fighting force came out from Whisky Flat they knew the white men were afraid. When three nights brought no further sign of Black Thun-

Black Thunder

der, the bold ones began to declare that the demon would come no more. Tavi-bo, the new medicine man, nodded his head slowly with his eyes half closed, and tapped with a dirty forefinger the new and mysterious medicine bag he wore for all to see.

“The Black Thunder was a white man when he chose to live the life of mortals,” he vouchsafed when To-sarke questioned him. “I have here the medicine which Lubelle got from the spirit talk of the white witch. The white witch is a fool. She does not know how to use her own medicine. Tavi-bo is wise. So the white medicine drove the Black Thunder into the clouds where he belongs.”

A fresh snowfall lay untrodden all up and down the creek to prove that Tavi-bo had spoken the truth. The great round footprints of Black Thunder were old and dim under the new-fallen snow. He had flown back into the clouds, as Tavi-bo had said.

A foray in broad daylight up the creek after cattle returned with singing, bearing much meat and the report that Black Thunder had not been abroad since the night of the scalp dance. And one young man wore a fresh scalp in his belt; that of poor, profane Deacon Allen.

That night they danced until they fell exhausted, drugged with evil exultation, — and no Black Thunder rode among them with his long knife of fire.

Black Thunder Rides No More

It must be said for Lubelle Wan-washe that she did her best to hold the Shoshones back from killing. But as is the way of fighting men the world over, when she talked of wrongs to be righted and fanned their ferocious desires, they listened avidly and said that she was very wise. But when she would persuade them toward mercy she was only a woman — a renegade squaw who had lived with white people too long to be true to her own. Even Que-ta-pat-so, who was wooing her in his best manner and so far had no reason for discouragement, looked at her askance when she argued for peace, and asked her if the white men had come in the night to beg for her friendship.

“The ghosts that guard Arlea Owen have stood before me and said that the one who harms her will die as Wa-hi died,” she boldly declared, on the second day after the new snow. “Let all remember those silent ones that stand close beside Arlea.”

“Jim Carver, he good man,” old Annie Green-Leaves muttered uneasily.

“Gaylord would not let Wa-hi burn me with Shokup,” Waunona observed softly. “But Emo is dead,” she added in a harsher tone. “The white men killed my boy Emo.”

“Their hearts have turned black toward us,” stated Que-ta-pat-so.

Lubelle closed her lips tightly together and stared

Black Thunder

into the fire. She could say no more, for she herself had denounced all white men as liars and thieves, the oppressors of the Indians; and in sober reflection she was not sure but that she had been right.

So those rapacious ones who had done all the brutal deeds and were itching for more plunder stole up the valley to Whisky Flat and hid themselves against the farther wall of the old saloon that stood beside the store, and waited.

Presently Burt Gaylord came out, glanced perfunctorily around and started across to the assay office. A flight of arrows came whispering, and Burt went down on his face with an arrow shaft standing upright and quivering above his back.

Lem Davis and Little Baldy came next, riding down the road with their rifles in the crook of one arm, and their eyes moving watchfully this way and that. A badly aimed arrow warned them, falling ten feet short and slanting in the snow. Both men fired in the direction indicated by the feathered shaft, then jumped their horses behind the widow Jensen's cabin, now empty and sagging under the weight of unmelted snow.

The shots brought every man inside alert and ready for battle, and under cover of the fire from the store the two cowboys raced for the back door. Hugh Whiting and Milt rushed out, picked up Gay-

Black Thunder Rides No More

lord and rushed back unhurt though the arrows fell around them like a flock of chickadees alighting in the snow.

Burt was alive, and Captain Wheeler, who was skilled in makeshift surgery, declared that the wound was not a serious one, having cut the shoulder muscles only. So the Indians gained nothing except a reckless confidence in themselves and the triumph of reducing Whisky Flat's fighting strength by one man — and he a leader.

They trotted campward single file through the snow, and loudly boasted that they had killed Chief Gaylord, and that Black Thunder had never made a track on the white man's side of the valley, which meant that they were not under his protection and there was no danger that he would return to fight the white man's battles. To-sarke's followers were therefore eager for further exploits, and began to talk gloatingly of the fine things they would have from the store when all the white men were killed.

Whisky Flat realized next morning that the camp was practically besieged. The discovery came when Lem Davis and Baldy went out to saddle their horses for the perilous ride across the valley. An arrow swished past Lem's head and drove deep into the door-casing beside him, and three others struck the rock wall of the store and fell to the snowy porch.

Black Thunder

"Come back!" Captain Wheeler commanded. "The devils would have your scalps before you got halfway to the creek!"

"Yeah — but we've gotta take some stuff over to Lew," Lem protested. "If we can make it over there, Cap'n, we can stay till Lew's able to ride."

"Yeah!" Little Baldy earnestly interjected. "Hell, you don't want him to lay in that wicky-up an' *die*, do yuh, Cap'n?"

Captain Wheeler's facial muscles contorted with a sudden agony. Then the soldier spirit took command and he threw his shoulders back.

"My son would be the last man on earth to want you to face certain death in the mistaken idea that you could serve him by so doing," he said stiffly. "Five men have been killed this week, and two wounded. Sandy Graves will die, I'm afraid, which will make a loss of six. There are eight men left who can be counted on to fight — including Dolf, who is a doubtful member. And the women must be protected. Lew must take care of himself for the present, boys. You carried him provisions yesterday."

"Yeah, and he was crazy as a bedbug when we got there!" Little Baldy cut in again. "Damn' near froze and starved, and Selim was gnawin' the poles off his manger, with hay sacked an' outa his reach, and Lew not able to drag a sack over to

Black Thunder Rides No More

him, even if he'd had the sense. Hole in his side you could put yore fist in ——”

“Aw, no! That's stretchin' it, Baldy,” honest Lem corrected. “It ain't very deep, but he's caught cold in it, looked like, an' it wasn't bandaged proper. Just a silk muffler wadded up on it — but we had a hell of a time gettin' him to let us tech it.”

“Yeah, he said it was sacred to the memory ——”

Lem kicked Baldy into an abrupt silence.

“Point is, Lew needs medicine, an' he needs it damn' bad. Yore own son ——”

“My own son must take his chance with the rest of you.” Captain Wheeler's voice could have quelled a mutiny just then. “Personal feelings cannot enter into the safety of this camp. I admire courage, but only a damn' fool will throw his life away. I have been placed in command here, by a unanimous vote, and I say that no man leaves this store while fifty Indians are lying in wait outside. You wouldn't live to get on your horses. Lew is safe enough for the present. He certainly won't be molested there.”

“Oh, no — he could die an' rot there an' he wouldn't be *molested!*” Baldy's voice broke boyishly on the word. “Gawd, but I'm sick of that word!”

CHAPTER THIRTY

LEW IS NOTHING TO HER PERSONALLY, BUT ———

IN the office, Arlea listened with suspended breath until the three took their argument into the back room. Up on the platform Henry Johnson, a Lucky Chance man, fired two shots and yelled that he had got one of the dirty whelps, anyhow. The acrid fumes of the black powder wafted down to Arlea who stood with her hands over her ears, staring fixedly at Burt Gaylord who lay propped on his side away from the lacerated muscles of his shoulder. Her concentrated gaze told plainly that her mind was focused on some scene conjured by her own thoughts.

"You'll get used to that," Burt said with grim humor, referring to the concussion of the rifle overhead. "Be a pioneer in spite of yourself, before the winter's over!"

"Did you hear what he said?" Arlea's eyes turned, not up at the crowing marksman on the platform, but toward the back of the room. "He calls himself a father, does he — and would let his own son lie out in the cold and freeze to death!"

"Lew's in a tepee over on the old camp ground."

Lew is Nothing to Her Personally

But Gaylord's eyebrows pulled together in worryment as he spoke. "He's got blankets and grub, and a horse to ride. And if he waits till dark ——"

"Yes, and he's wounded, and out of his head with the pain! It's the most inhuman thing I ever heard of in my life!"

"Not inhuman, Arlea. Don't be so quick to sit in judgment. We all hate it badly enough — but it would be much more inhuman to let the boys ride away from this store to-day. They wouldn't live to get fifty yards from the door."

"No, and the cowards — they're not even going to *try*!" Arlea's voice had the rasping note of incipient tears. "They'll sit here and let a man *die* ——"

"Now, look here!" Burt painfully moved his head so that he more nearly faced her. "You talk like a silly child. Don't you suppose his father knows more about it than you do? Don't you suppose he cares more? We all do, for that matter ——"

"Oh, *do* you!"

"And there isn't one that wouldn't take any risk to help Lew. But this isn't a risk — it's suicide."

"I don't care what it is! A human being deserves some consideration, I should think. When a man is wounded so he can't help himself, he's

Black Thunder

got to be taken care of. Somebody must take the risk, if I have to go myself! ”

“ You talk like an idiot! ”

“ Oh, *do* I! If that’s the way you feel about it, I may as well act like one, Mr. Gaylord.”

“ Don’t Mr. Gaylord me, in that childishly haughty way you have! You’ll stay inside and behave yourself, that’s what you’ll do! ”

“ I shall not! Lew Wheeler is nothing to me personally, but he is a human being and it’s absolute, fiendish *murder* to let him lie over there and die! And I shall do as I please about going. You’ve no authority over me, if you please! ”

“ A lot you know about it! I’ll have you know I’m the Uncle Albert you were so afraid you might find and be compelled to acknowledge as a relative. It’s time I told you, and took you in hand, my lady. So you’ll do exactly as I say, from now on, and we’ll have no more high-and-mighty airs.”

“ Oh! So at last you admit it, do you? Well, you’re rather late in making up your mind to confess the *deep disgrace* of my being your niece! Don’t you suppose I knew some man in this camp was my uncle, when I got that locket with grandmother’s picture? I very quickly understood that whoever he was, he was not very anxious to claim the relationship. But once I started guessing, I knew it was you. Your eyes are — are family eyes.

Lew is Nothing to Her Personally

And you were the one who didn't want me here, and acted offish and — and guilty. Besides, the G in Uncle Albert's name could easily be Gaylord. Albert Gaylord Elwood could very easily be changed to Burt Gaylord, and I wonder why I was so stupid I didn't see it long ago. So you needn't think you can suddenly say, 'I'll have you know that I'm your Uncle Albert and you must do what I tell you to do.' You can't squelch me that way, and you ought to know it. There's a certain family pride ——”

“Mulishness,” Burt corrected with twitching lips. “All right, Arlea, let's call a truce. If you can accept me as your black-sheep uncle, I'll try and endure your stubborn temper. As you say, it runs in the family. Now, will you get your uncle a drink? As a wounded human being I think I deserve some consideration!”

Slowly her anger yielded to the first look of unconstrained affection she had ever seen in his eyes. She smiled reluctantly back at him.

“Why certainly, Uncle Albert. I'll do anything on earth for you ——”

“Anything except obey me, I suppose. Well, we both said some foolish things we didn't really mean. As my long-lost niece, of whom I'm really proud, would you give your uncle — a kiss?”

“I was going to anyway, only it's nicer to be in-

Black Thunder

vited," said Arlea, suddenly and adorably meek. "There! Now we both belong. And we start fresh from here; shall we?"

"Pray God we'll have years of 'belonging'," Burt responded gravely, reaching out quickly for her hand and squeezing it tight in his long fingers. "It's hard to be laid aside like a log just when you're going to need me most. Little girl, do you think it would be any use after all to—pray? We're going to need help from somewhere, and God——"

"I've been thinking a lot about that." Arlea held a cup of water to his fevered mouth, then sat down on a box beside his bed. "Maybe people just don't pray right, Uncle Albert. I—I dreamed about Christ one night last week, and He was so wonderful! I'd been terribly blue all day, and everything looked so black in the future, it seemed as if I never could face it. And He was so—sort of human and sensible. I just loved the way He looked at me in my dream, and said, 'Don't be afraid, just trust me a little. Why don't you give me a chance to help you, Arlea?'" She laid her other hand over Burt's and stroked his fingers gently.

"Uncle Albert, He made me feel so ashamed! Since that dream I've been thinking. And I believe we've had too much wrath of God preached

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at us, and not enough love. It's been all 'Thou shalt not.' And now when I read about Christ in my Testament that I got for Christmas, I can see how He just tried to teach people not to be afraid of God, but to let go of their doubts and give Him a chance. That's what He said, Uncle Albert — 'Why don't you give me a chance?'

"To hear Brother Van pray ——"

"Brother Van is an old dear, but he keeps thinking that tribulation is about all we can expect in this world, and that we ought to be satisfied with knowing we'll be happy in the next one. Brother Van would have made a wonderful martyr. Can't you see him forgiving his enemies while they lighted the faggots around him? But that doesn't help us out of this terrible situation. In my dream I knew Christ wanted to take care of me now, and not wait till I was scalped and sent to heaven. That's what I was thinking of," she added hesitantly, "when I said I'd risk going over ——"

"Look here, Arlea." A febrile anxiety sharpened Burt's voice. "That's out of the question. Why don't you pray for Lew? I wish you would. It won't do any harm — and it might help."

"But that's cowardly, to be afraid to trust Christ for myself, and then pray for ——"

"Arlea, will you stop talking about ——" An incautious movement racked the wounded shoulder

Black Thunder

most agonizingly. Burt groaned and immediately fainted, which of course ended the argument for good.

But it did not change Arlea's mind about her duty toward a certain human being. The thought of Laughing Lew lying alone, wounded and with no one to give him so much as a drink of water, tortured her until she could have screamed, but there was not a soul to whom she dared speak of her mental anguish.

Brother Van was contemplating death as an imminent ordeal which would open to him the gates of glory. So great a devotional fervor had filled his soul that he was no longer concerned with temporal things. Whether he died to-day or next week or next month mattered little to Brother Van, except that a delay might enable him to persuade his companions to accept salvation before they went to meet their Maker. If she spoke to Brother Van about her trouble, he would pray that the soul of Laughing Lew might be saved in this, the eleventh hour. What Arlea wanted was to save that splendid body.

The widow Jensen was not saying much. Her rheumatism was tormenting her again, so she sat with her knees to the fire and darned socks and mittens, and sewed on buttons, and hoped for the best. A valiant soul had Maria Jensen, but not so

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valiant that she would advise any man to attempt the short trip across the valley to-day.

Liz Porter had dreamed too often of disaster to do other than look upon each fresh calamity with a certain melancholy satisfaction, as one more proof that her prophecies would be fulfilled to the last black letter. Arlea could not have borne an I-told-you-so from Liz.

The men were all alike — or so Arlea said to herself. Captain Wheeler was Lew's father. If he had the fortitude and the sober judgment to let his only son endure as best he could the distress of his wound, certainly no man there would defy his authority and make the attempt to cross the valley. Lige and Lem and Baldy wouldn't, although they looked as if they had just been forced to officiate at Lew's hanging.

Thrown back upon her own mental resources, Arlea turned desperately to that Christ of whom she had dreamed so comfortingly. No one else could help her, that was sure — and He had said, "Why don't you trust me a little?"

But it was not in Arlea's nature to give anything in small measure; be it anger or apology, pride or humility, selfishness or service, she gave from the depth of her heart as she read it at the time. For that was her downright honesty expressing itself according to her emotion of the moment; childish

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emotion sometimes, though she might next plumb unsuspected depths of womanhood.

Now that she was thrown back upon the faith of her childhood she gave it without a nagging doubt to cloud her perfect trust. Brother Van would have been shocked at her prayer, for she merely closed her eyes and stilled her shuttling thoughts and said simply:

“Lord, I’m going to do as you said, and give you a chance to help me. I’m going over there where Lew is, and you’re going with me and see that I get through all right. I’m sure I shall, because I do trust you. Amen.”

After that she made a little bundle of the things she thought would be needed, watched her chance, and just before sunset saw her opportunity and slipped unnoticed out of the back door, made a slight detour while sixty-one Indians watched her in dumb astonishment, and struck out across the valley with a smile on her mouth and a little flame of exultation in her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"THE WOMAN GOES TO FIND HER HEART"

"GET away from that horse's heels! Do you want to get your head knocked off?" Laughing Lew tried to lift himself to an elbow, failed and lay back glaring.

"Well, for pity's sake! I've been fussing around here for an hour, almost, and he hasn't even offered to kick. Do you think this is the first time I ever saw a horse? Just because I was raised in the East you seem to think——"

"I guess that's about the size of it — I *seem* to think." Then, as his eyes went seekingly around the lodge, he added brusquely, "Where are the rest of them? Who came with you?"

"Why, nobody — except God, of course." Arlea stooped to push another stick into the heart of the flames, and to straighten the small pail that held coffee.

"You never came alone! Didn't any one ——?"

"Oh, a few Indians tagged along, quite a ways behind. I don't consider them as anybody." She glanced reflectively across at him. "Things are terribly inconvenient for cooking, but I've got a hoecake almost baked, and the coffee is nearly

Black Thunder

ready. I didn't think you ought to have meat to-night. But I brought a jar of Maria's wild grape jelly. That will be good with your hoecake."

Lew's unwinking stare must have been rather disconcerting, for her voice dwindled at the last until it was very faint.

"I must be thicker skulled than usual to-night. Would you condescend to tell me how and why and when you got here?" Aside from a harshness in his voice brought there by a few days of suffering, Lew did not sound particularly sick.

"Well, I walked over. And I came because your father says every man will be needed before the winter is over, so there should be no unnecessary risking of life. And I came about an hour ago."

Some minutes elapsed before Lew's shocked intelligence sorted and digested those remarkable statements; though they had surely been sufficiently clear. Arlea had brought the hoecake and grape jelly, and was folding her handkerchief over the edge of the hot bucket so that she could pour the coffee without burning her fingers, before Lew recovered speech.

"They must all be crazy over there, to let you come!" he exploded then.

"Oh, no," said Arlea, "they're not. Besides, they didn't let me. I just came anyway."

“Goes to Find Her Heart”

“What for?” If Lew’s tone was brutal he did not know it. He was merely upset and bewildered, and trying to recover his mental balance.

“What for means exactly the same as why,” Arlea told him didactically, handing him his coffee in a large tin cup. “And I told you why.”

“No, you didn’t. You said a lot of words, but they didn’t explain why you came.”

“Well — if you don’t eat your supper I’ll never speak to you again! Well — the Indians were all around the store, hooting and yelling and watching for a chance to shoot some one. So none of the men could get away. Your father wouldn’t let them outside. Last night the Indians shot Uncle Albert — you know Mr. Gaylord is my uncle, only I didn’t know it for a long while — but he’s only wounded. That seemed to make the Indians awfully bold. They were up around the store at daylight this morning. So ——”

“In God’s name, Arlea, *why are you here?*”

“Why, just as you say, I’m here in God’s name. Don’t you remember where it says in the Bible we must visit the sick?”

“Don’t talk like an idiot!”

“That’s what Uncle Albert said when I had *him* cornered. I never before realized how much you two are alike.”

She watched him as a cat watches a mouse be-

Black Thunder

tween its paws, with a pleased indulgence for its tentative movements; because it simply can't escape, it is welcome to try.

"Now, you're here, do you realize you'll have to stay?"

"Why, I expect I'll be needed, if it's only to carry wood. The Indians have simply *skinned* this ridge. I had to go clear down to the creek, and drag up two dead bushes. I should think the boys would have taken the time to lay in a supply while they were here."

"Don't you know what every one will say?" Lew's mental faculties were surely out of focus, or he would have known that Whisky Flat had reached a height that was far above the fog of petty scandals.

"Oh, I suppose they'll all agree that I'm an idiot; I'm getting used to that." With painstaking care she spread a piece of hoecake with the purloined jelly. "Here — eat this, and let your victuals stop your mouth. That's what they always told me when I talked too much."

"They'll all think you're in love with me! And I'm sure — a-ah!"

The final ejaculation was a choked kind of gurgle, because Arlea had unexpectedly rammed the bread and jelly into his mouth.

"Don't try to talk with your mouth full! It's

“Goes to Find Her Heart”

very bad manners — and besides, you’ll choke yourself to death! ”

For good reason Lew made no audible reply to that, though his eyes did say a great deal in the next ten seconds. While he was still glaring and coughing his glance passed Arlea and his eyes widened in something akin to horror. The girl’s head turned slowly, and as slowly she got to her feet.

“ Oh, Lubelle! I’m so glad you came over to help! Do you know what’s the best thing to do for a person who’s out of his head and imagines all sorts of things? ”

“ The young men said that you walked alone to this place where the ghosts have built again the lodge of Sho-kup.” Standing just within the lodge, her arms folded within the plaid shawl Arlea’s mother had given her, Lubelle Wan-washe’s big black eyes went measuringly from one face to the other. “ Then I know it is Black Thunder in this lodge, and that he is sick. The woman goes to find her heart, and I know that your heart is with Black Thunder.”

“ Oh, *is* it! ”

“ *Is it*, Lubelle? Go on and tell me — *she* won’t! ” This from Lew, whose voice had returned and brought with it the fruit of many lonely days and nights.

Black Thunder

In the ruddy glow of the fire Lubelle's sombre face lighted suddenly with a smile.

"Black Thunder should first tell where his heart has flown," she said laconically. "Perhaps the two are grown together like one heart."

She turned, lifted the flap and went out, leaving the two alone to settle the heart problem after the manner of youth since the world began.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“THEY SAY THERE WILL BE A WEDDING FEAST”

“THE white men are quite safe in the store. And I gave Burt Gaylord the letter which you wrote for him. Now I will bring more wood to boil the soup for Black Thunder.”

“Wait a minute, Lubelle!” Arlea’s voice stopped the squaw as she was leaving the lodge. “What did they say when you told them I was here?”

“They said there will be a wedding feast in the valley if your God spares the mouths to eat it.” With that Lubelle disappeared as Indians do, abruptly and in silence.

“Well! Did you ever see a person so much like a clam as Lubelle is?” Arlea exclaimed pettishly as she unfolded the note which Lubelle had placed in her hands. “I wanted to know how Uncle Albert is this morning, and Maria’s rheumatism, and Sandy Graves, and all of them.”

“Maybe the letter will tell all that.”

“It doesn’t. They know Lubelle can read, and they wouldn’t let her find out anything to tell the Indians. You know, Lew, they don’t trust her at all. This is from your father, and he says:

“‘Stay just where you are. You are much safer

Black Thunder

in the lodge than anywhere else. God bless you for your disobedience, and — mm ——' ”

“Go on. Read it all, why don't you — sweet-heart?”

Arlea blushed and crumpled the coarse paper in her hand.

“It's nothing — oh, yes, it is too! He sent his love to — to his dear little daughter-to-be! I — I just simply love your father, Lew!”

Lubelle returned, bearing an armful of wood. She paid no attention whatever to the lovers whispering together six feet away, but she did keep a wary eye on Selim, and walked as wide of his manger as the limits of the roomy lodge would permit. Lew had wanted to make that lodge impressively huge, and Lubelle was grateful now for its spaciousness. Selim, it must be remembered, hated Indians.

“I will help you and I will help the white men, and I will help the Shoshones, Arlea,” Lubelle said when she had done all she could for their comfort. “To-morrow you must go to the store and say that Lubelle has done a good deed and there will be no more killing. Good-bye.” Before they could speak she slipped away.

“The Black Thunder is making strong medicine in the ghost lodge of Sho-kup. He has called the

“There Will Be a Wedding Feast”

white girl and the two spirits that walk beside her, and the white girl serves him while he makes the strong magic. The demon horse is there, and I saw the flames which are its bed.”

“What is the medicine Black Thunder makes?” Tavi-bo fingered his new medicine bag uneasily.

“When I looked through the side of the ghost lodge, with my medicine which makes me invisible to the spirits so they cannot harm me, I heard. Black Thunder will ride again when the moon has gone away. When he rides again all the Indians will fall dead before him. Like leaves from the trees the spirits are coming to the ghost lodge, to the great council fire of Black Thunder. He tells them that he would have this valley for his ghost village. He tells them that if the Shoshones are foolish and their medicine is weak they will stay, and then the Black Thunder will ride. When he rides again the ghost fire will eat the Shoshones as flame eats dry grass. Not one will be left alive to look upon the ghost village of the Black Thunder.”

Stark silence followed the words of Lubelle Wanwashe until Que-ta-pat-so rose and stood with his blanket folded about him.

“What does the Black Thunder say of the white men? Will the ghost fire lick their bones also?”

“White men or Indians, it is all the same. But he will keep the girl, for she has pleased him and

Black Thunder

he will have her for his spirit woman. But I do not go to tell the white men of the death that rides down the valley when the moon is gone. The white men are not my friends. Let their God save them from the burning if He will. It is nothing to me."

At sunrise next morning, Arlea stood outside the tepee and saw a remarkable sight. Winding along a low ridge that followed the creek for a distance up the valley, a line of moving figures plodded one behind the other, bearing burdens of food, blankets and papooses on their backs. Like gigantic ants they looked, as the sun peered down at them from the big peak which guarded the Pass.

"Why, Lew! Something must have happened! The Indians are all on the move! Do you suppose Lubelle got them to leave the valley? But how can they?"

"Oh, they can, all right, through the Upper Pass, the way Ole came in, you remember. We talked about getting out that way, but you women couldn't have stood the trip, nor old Joe; and there were too many wounded, after the trouble started. I had some idea of scaring the Injuns out that way—but then I got nicked in the side and that ended things for me."

"Don't you mean," Arlea questioned shyly, "that things just began for you then?"

“There Will Be a Wedding Feast”

Every man and every woman can imagine the drift of their thoughts after that.

Lem and Baldy came puffing up the slope soon after, bursting into the lodge with a whoop.

“Say, Lew!” cried Lem, “the Injuns are on the march, bag and baggage! Black Thunder scared ’em off all right! Milt and Jim Carver says they think the valley’s haunted and you couldn’t hire ’em to stay, once they make up their minds to move.”

“Yeah, an’ Burt says for you an’ Arlea to come on back,” Baldy cut in as was his enthusiastic habit. “Arlea, Burt says you’re liable to git your ears boxed for runnin’ away an’ scarin’ the liver outa the hull bunch.”

“Yeah — we’d ’a’ come after yuh that night, but nobody knowed you was gone. The Injuns crowded up an’ raised such a hullabaloo that us fellers had our hands full, an’ then Lubelle come with yore note ——”

“Yeah, an’ Brother Van is studyin’ up on the marriage ceremony ——”

“Yeah, that’s right, Lew, he is!”

“He’d better,” Lew declared earnestly. “Because it will have to be said — and he might leave out ‘Till death do us part’, or something. And that,” he finished boldly, “would never do at all! Would it, Arlea?”

Black Thunder

"I was always taught to be thorough," Arlea said demurely.

"Yeah, and this weddin's goin' to be thorough!" Baldy said darkly. "They's several of us boys that's swallerin' our jealousy over Lew. We're goin' to give you folks ——"

"Aw, come on an' leave 'em alone, Baldy! We brought the pung, Lew. We'll go git things ready to haul yuh home."

Within the lodge was silence for a moment. Then Arlea turned and looked at Lew, and her eyes were shining.

"'Home', he said, Lew. I wonder — why, I've been thinking all along about getting away from here, and hating it so, and now — Lew, I think he's right. I believe this is home, after all."

"It's home," said Laughing Lew. "Of course it's home; I knew it when I came and found you here."

Arlea did not answer for some minutes. Then she knelt and laid her cheek against his stubbly beard.

"Lew, we're not shut into this valley at all. It's just the rest of the world shut out of it! But what do we care? We don't need the world ——"

"All right, folks," Lem called cheerfully. "Looks like the hull camp is trailin' across the flat to see what's keepin' us so long!"

THE END

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